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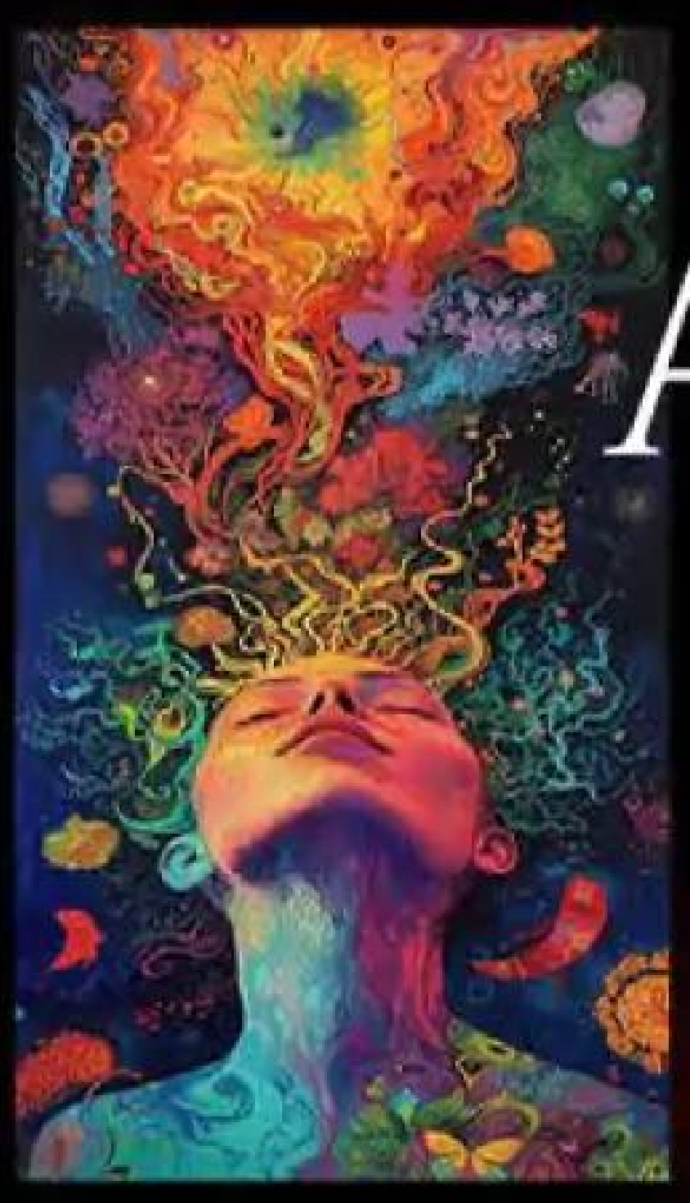
An Exclusive Interview
Dr. Christopher Harding
on Himiko, Japan's Shaman-Queen

The Orgiastic Rites of Bacchanalia:
Divine Ecstasy in Ancient Rome

BEYOND THE VEIL

SHAMANS, PSYCHEDELICS AND ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS



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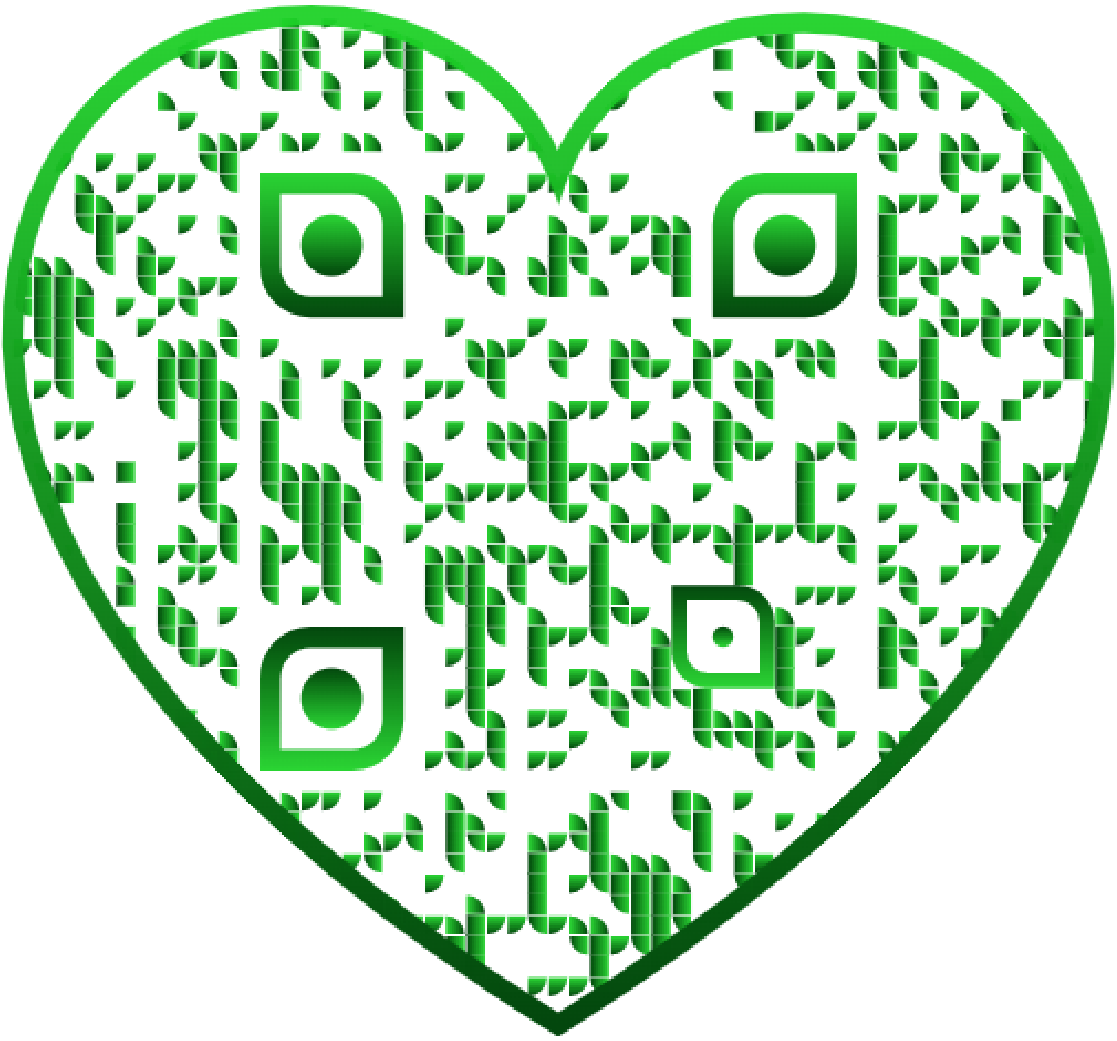
The Plutonion of Hierapolis
A Sacred "Gate to Hell" Shrouded in Death and Mystery



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CHIEF EDITOR
Massimo Bonasorte
ART DIRECTOR
Rose-Marie Ernetorp
IT & MARKETING
Ioannis Syrigos

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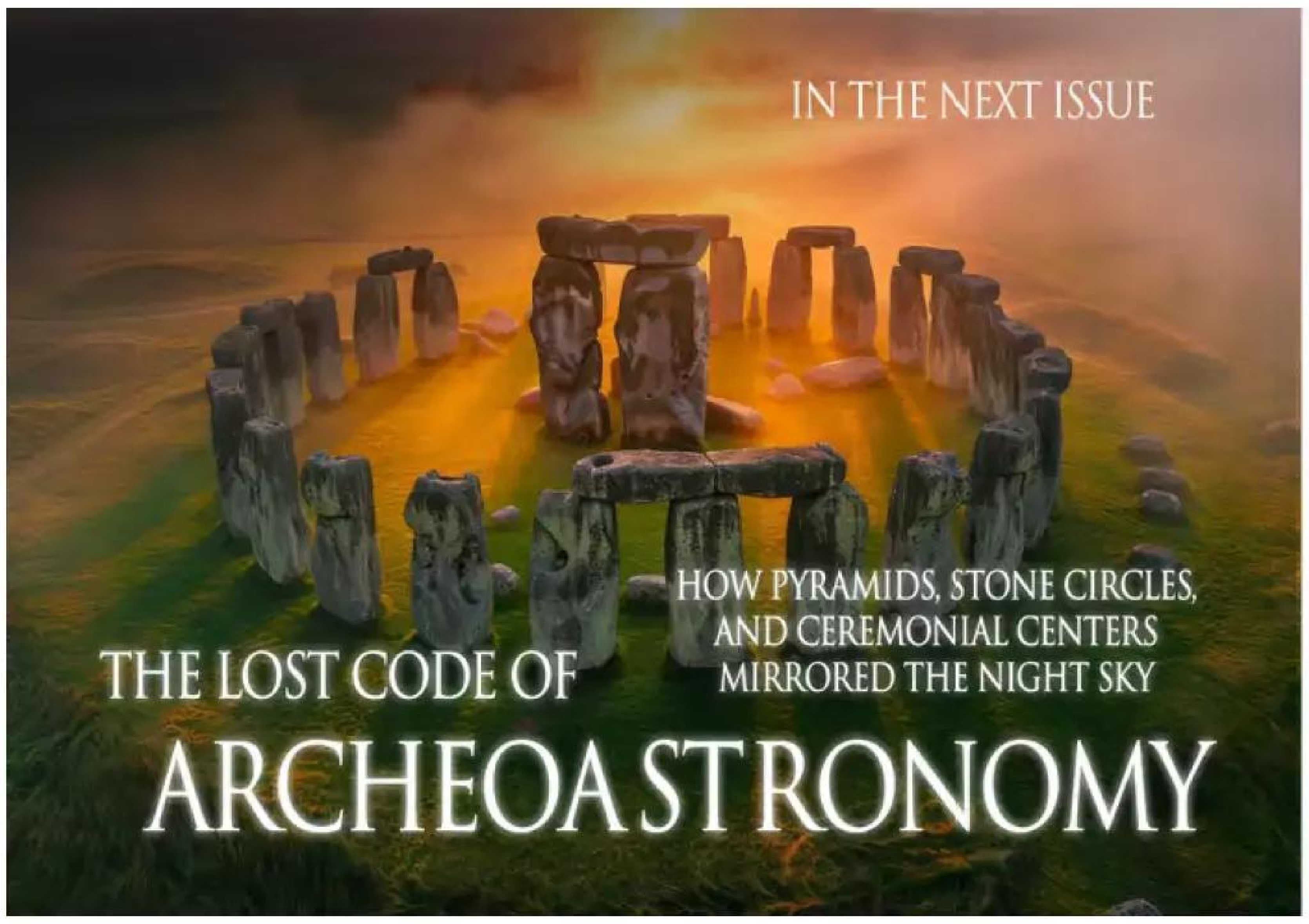
MASSIMO BONASORTE

Chief Editor, Ancient Origins Magazine

Long before temples were built or scriptures written, there was the shaman. Alone at the fire's edge, cloaked in feathers, eyes closed in trance—he or she was the ancient world's first mediator between visible life and invisible mystery. In the shadows shamans stood as pivotal figures bridging earthly and spiritual worlds. What powered their insight? The answer often grew underground: sacred plants. Psychoactive substances, they were keys, carefully prepared and consumed in ceremonies, to unlock trance states where shamans sought visions, healed the sick, or found lost souls. Shamans were the heartbeat of ancient societies, serving as healers, diviners, and cultural custodians. They were believed to communicate with spirits, ancestors, or deities, addressing physical ailments, spiritual imbalances, and communal crises like famine or conflict. Chosen through unique experiences—visions, dreams, or illnesses—shamans held a liminal role, navigating between worlds to maintain harmony and provide guidance. Their authority stemmed from their perceived divine connection, making them indispensable in societies from Siberia to the Americas. In today's age of technology and rationalism, their worldview might seem distant. But revisit the archaeological layers and academic footnotes, and a surprising truth emerges: the wisdom of the ancients was often rooted—in visions born of the earth: sacred plants... The journey into the mysteries of human kind continues with Artifact World: we will discuss the Spirits of the Forest and the Shamanic Deer Headdresses of Star Carr, in England: archaeologists uncovered a portal into the Mesolithic mind: 11,000-year-old deer skull masks believed to carry deep spiritual and shamanic significance. In History's Heroes is the time for the most important researcher for the shamanism: Mircea Eliade and his outstanding study of ancient society and the role of the shaman and exploration of myth, symbol, and the experience of the sacred. In a fascinating interview for Unlocking the Past we will know Himiko, Japan's Shaman-Queen and Dr. Christopher Harding, a historian, broadcaster, and senior lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, specializes in the cultural and intellectual history of Japan, India, and Asia. Last challenge for this number is about a special and sacred food: The Mysterious "Black Broth" of Ancient Sparta... you can do it at home, just follow the recipe if you want to be strong like a real spartan warrior... can you?


IN THE NEXT ISSUE
HOW PYRAMIDS, STONE CIRCLES, AND CEREMONIAL CENTERS MIRRORED THE NIGHT SKY
THE LOST CODE OF
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EXPERTS IN THIS ISSUE...

GEORGES FERY

Tri-lingual freelance writer and photographer based in Dallas, Texas. Travelled extensively over the last 35 years from Europe to Africa and the Americas. His web site www.georgefery.com focuses on the history of the Americas up to the arrival of the Europeans.

MARTINI FISHER

Martini Fisher comes from a family of history and culture buffs. She graduated from Macquarie University, Australia, with a degree in Ancient History. Although her interest in history is diverse, Martini is especially interested in mythologies, folklores and ancient funerary practices.

SPOTLIGHT: BEYOND THE VEIL
SHAMANS, PSYCHEDELICS AND ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

OZGUR ETLI

Ozgur Baris Etli, was born in Turkey. He is a writer and published four e-books about Proto-Turkish history, the origin of Sumerians (Anau Civilization) and Proto-Turkish cosmology until this day. He also have a master programme on Astronomy and Space Sciences at Ege University.

NATHAN FALDE

Nathan Falde graduated from American Public University in 2010 with a Bachelors Degree in History, and has a long-standing fascination with ancient history, historical mysteries, mythology, astronomy and esoteric topics of all types. He is a full-time freelance writer writer.

GARY MANNERS

Gary is an editor and content manager for Ancient Origins. He has a BA in Politics and Philosophy from the University of York and a Diploma in Marketing from CIM.

ALEKSA VUČKOVIĆ

I am published author of over ten historical fiction novels, and specialize in Slavic linguistics. Always pursuing my passions for writing and literature, I strive to deliver a thrilling and captivating read that touches upon history's most enigmatic subjects.

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Archaeonews

By Nathan Falde

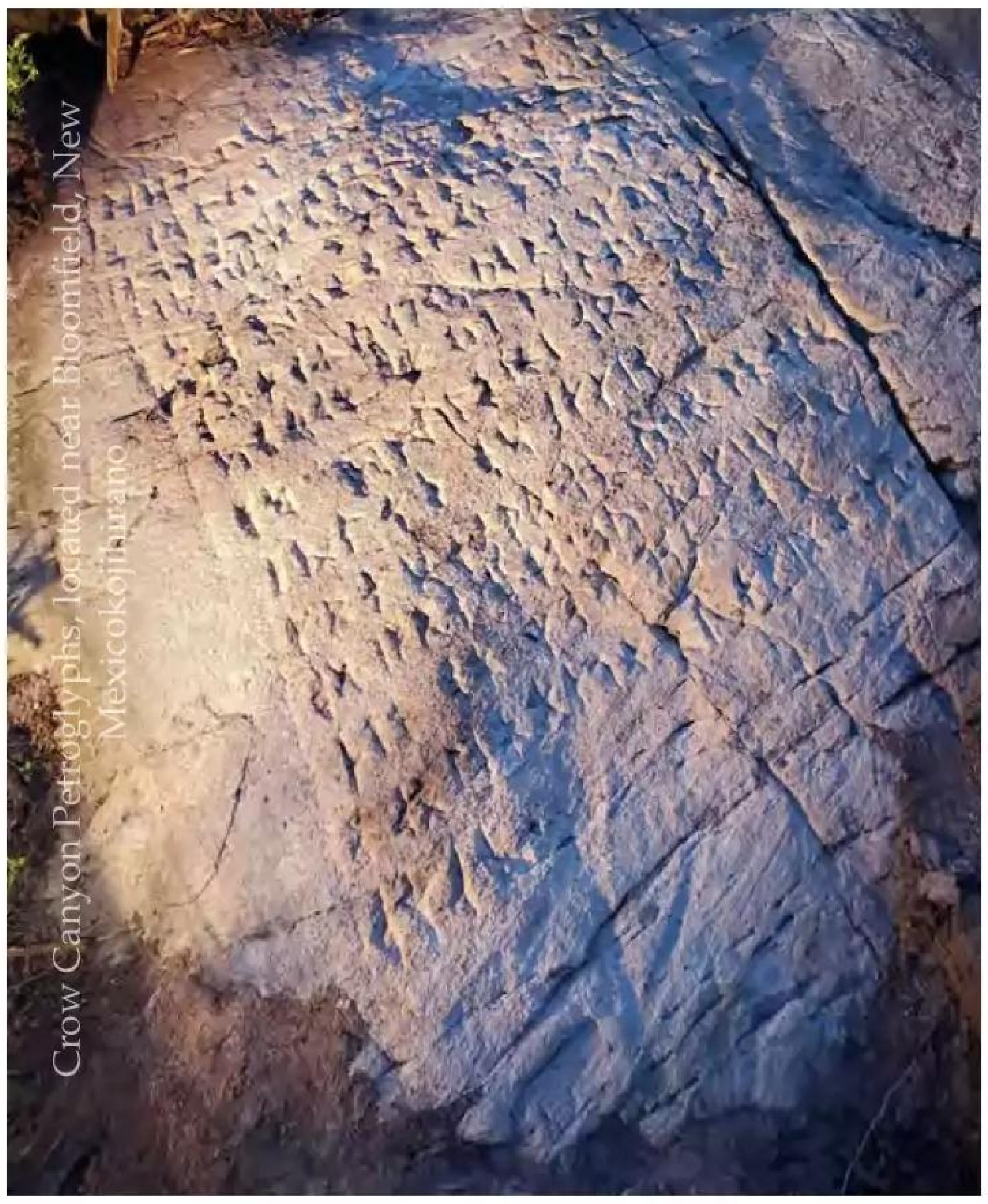
WAWA RUNESTONE: A MYSTERIOUS 'NORDIC' CARVING EMERGES IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

In a remote forest near Wawa, Ontario, a wind-toppled tree in 2018 revealed a hidden archaeological marvel: a massive bedrock engraving featuring 255 Nordic runes and an intricately carved boat with 16 figures. Known now as the Wawa Runestone, this discovery has drawn international attention for its craftsmanship and cultural mystery.

David Gadzala and Ryan Primrose of the Ontario Centre for Archaeological Education (OCARE) have led research into the site, with Primrose spending years studying the inscription. To authenticate and interpret the runes, he brought in renowned Swedish runologist Henrik Williams, who identified the carving as a version of The Lord's Prayer, written in Old Swedish using the Futhark alphabet. The prayer closely resembles a 1611 translation reprinted in the 19th century.

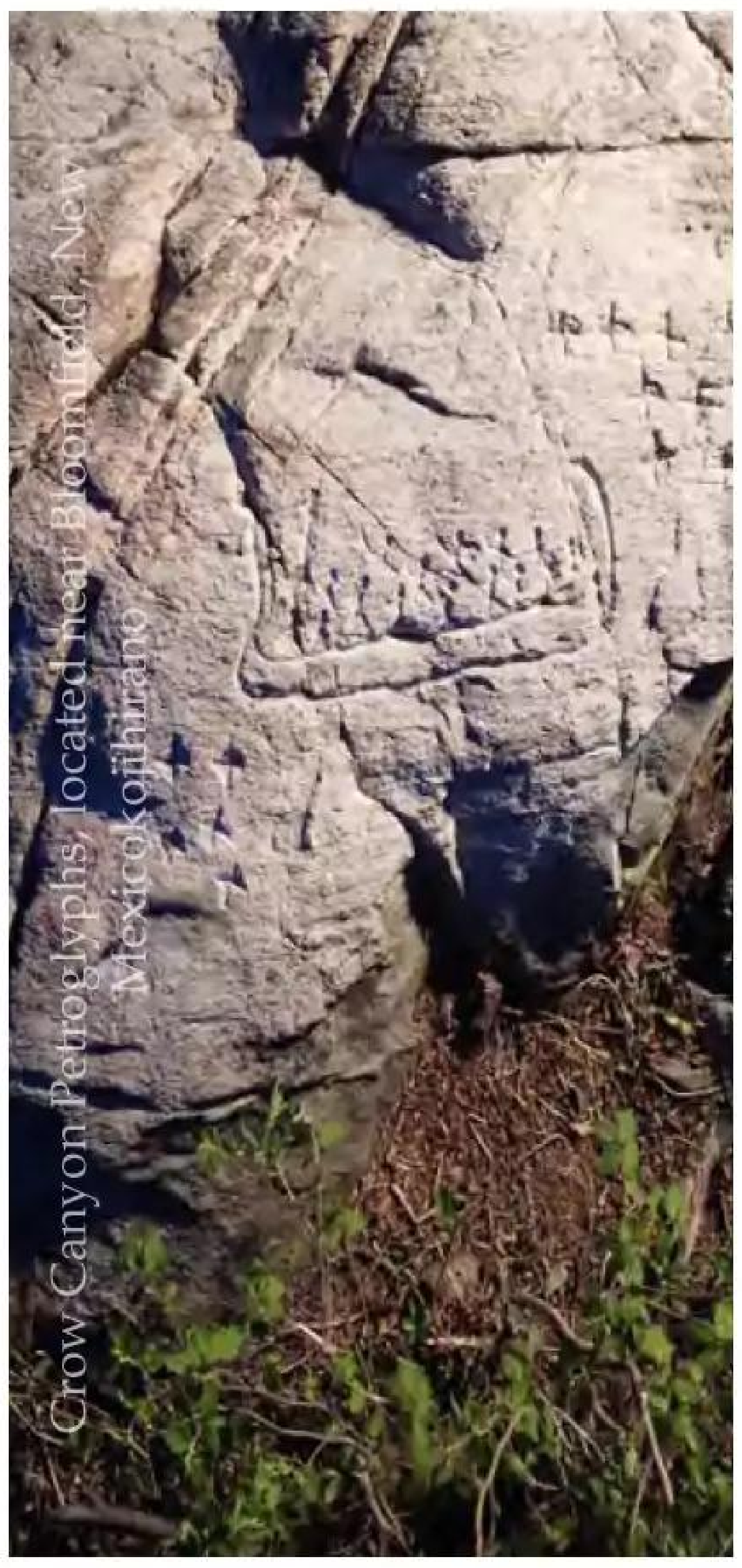
While some might hope for a Viking connection, the evidence points to a 19th-century origin, likely tied to Swedish laborers working for the Hudson's Bay Company in the Canadian wilderness. The Michipicoten trading post, located nearby, historically employed Swedish workers, supporting this theory.

The boat image carved beside the runes may symbolize a spiritual journey or a literal passage through the rugged Canadian landscape. The carving's purpose and why it was buried remain uncertain - was it hidden, or merely overtaken by time and nature? Although not ancient, OCARE considers the runestone a site of national and international significance. Plans are underway to preserve it with a protective shelter and eventually open it to the public as a cultural heritage landmark - a poignant trace of faith and identity carved into Canada's boreal wilderness.



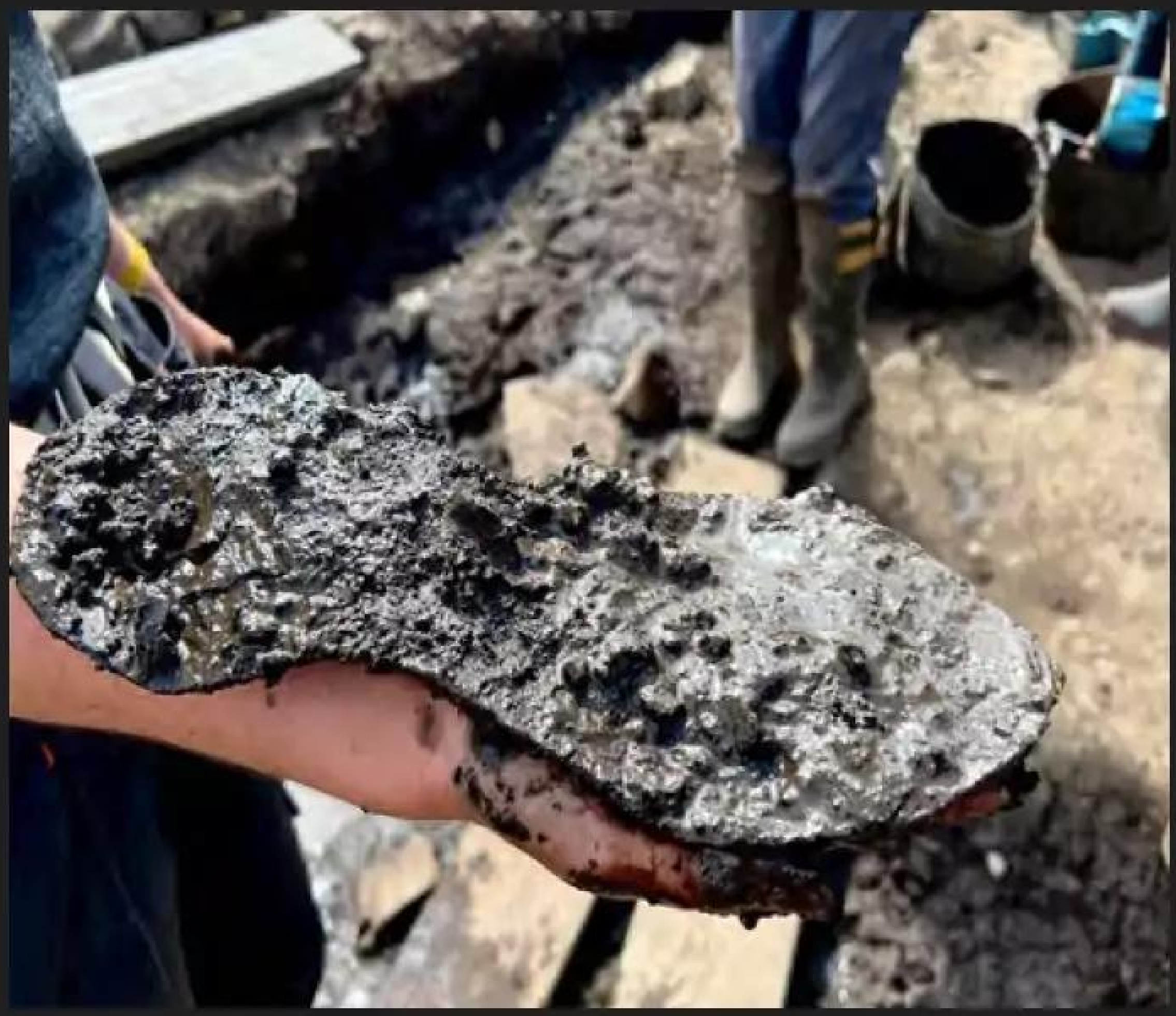
Crow Canyon Petroglyphs, located near Bloomfield, New Mexicokojihirano

Crow Canyon Petroglyphs, located near Bloomfield, New Mexicokojihirano



Crow Canyon Petroglyphs, located near Bloomfield, New Mexicokojihirano

GIANT ROMAN SHOE FOUND AT MAGNA FORT STUNS ARCHAEOLOGISTS

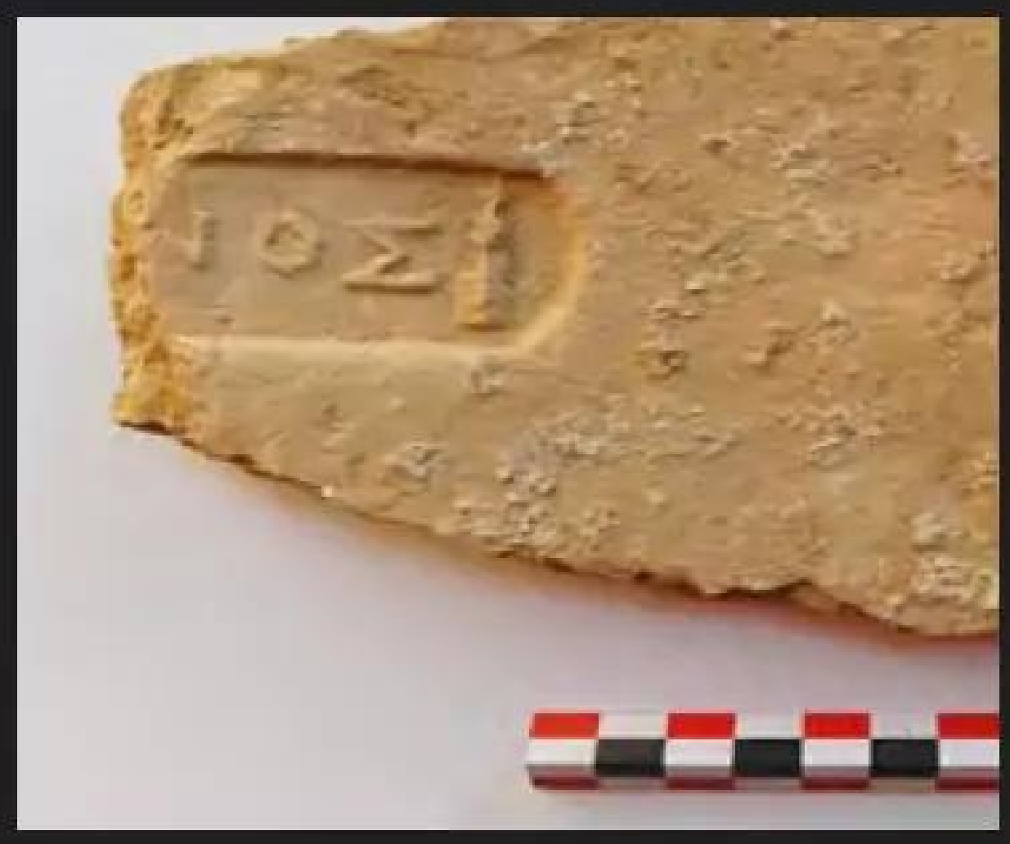


A stunning discovery at the ancient Roman fort of Magna near Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland, England, has captured imaginations: a massive Roman leather shoe measuring 32 cm (12.6 inches) - equivalent to a modern UK men's size 13–14. Unearthed from a waterlogged defensive ditch, the shoe likely belonged to a large soldier stationed at the fort nearly 2,000 years ago.

Dubbed "Footius Maximus," the shoe was one of several remarkably preserved examples found thanks to the site's anaerobic soil conditions. According to senior archaeologist Rachel Frame, it may be the largest shoe in the Vindolanda Trust's extensive Roman footwear collection. Despite missing some sole layers, the shoe retains its heel and reveals details about Roman footwear construction, including multiple leather layers, stitching, thongs, and hobnails used for grip and durability.

Magna, built around 80 AD, served as a strategic outpost along key Roman roads and was later part of the Hadrian's Wall frontier. Recent excavations have uncovered various artifacts including pottery, tent pegs, and leather fragments, offering insights into Roman military life. Archaeologists hope to protect Magna's rare archaeological treasures while deepening our understanding of Rome's far-flung northern frontier - one giant footprint at a time.

NEW DISCOVERIES UNEARTHED AT 'HOMER'S SCHOOL' ITHACA



Recent excavations at Agios Athanasios, known since the 19th century as "Homer's School", on the island of Ithaca have offered groundbreaking insights into the island's prehistoric and classical past. Led by Emeritus Professor Giannos G. Lolos and supported by the Greek Ministry of Culture, the research suggests continuous occupation of the site from the Final Neolithic (late 5th millennium BC) through the Roman period.

Located on a naturally fortified hill in northern Ithaca, the site features prominent Mycenaean and Hellenistic layers. Recent finds include flint tools, Neolithic pottery, Mycenaean kylix fragments, and a cistern with Late Bronze Age elements-suggesting the site was once a key Mycenaean center. Importantly, evidence points to a coordinated regional settlement system, possibly overseen by a local ruler-a "King of Ithaca" archetype.

Among the most exciting discoveries are ceramic inscriptions bearing the name of Odysseus, supporting long-held theories that the site may have served as a cult center dedicated to the Homeric hero. Hellenistic structures, including a monumental building and tower, were likely part of a religious complex that hosted rituals and games in his honor. With ongoing work by a multidisciplinary team, scholars believe this legendary site may indeed represent the heart of Odysseus' ancient Ithaca-where myth, memory, and archaeology converge.

THE GHOST AND THE GARDEN OF NINFA, LAZIO, ITALY

The Garden of Ninfa, nestled in Lazio, Italy, is often described as Europe's most romantic garden, intertwining botanical beauty with medieval ruins. Founded over the remains of the ancient town of Ninfa, abandoned in the 14th century due to malaria and political strife, it was transformed by the Caetani family into an idyllic landscape during the 20th century. Yet, mysteries linger, with whispers of ghostly figures and unanswered questions about its medieval past, still preserved amid lush greenery and crumbling walls.

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SU NURAXI DI BARUMINI. THE BRONZE AGE FORT, SARDINIA, ITALY

Su Nuraxi di Barumini, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Sardinia, stands as an enigmatic testament to Bronze Age ingenuity. Built around 1500 BCE, this sprawling nuragic complex includes an impressive central tower surrounded by defensive walls and labyrinthine dwellings. Archaeologists have unearthed pottery, tools, and mysterious figurines, suggesting a highly organized society. Yet, many mysteries persist: Who exactly built Su Nuraxi? What rituals occurred within its chambers? These unanswered questions continue to fascinate historians and visitors, fueling speculation about Sardinia's ancient past.

Each year, Buddhists around the world gather to celebrate Vesak Day, or Waisak, with Borobudur Temple in Central Java, Indonesia, serving as a major center of devotion. Observed on the full moon of Vesakha, typically in April or May, the day marks the birth, enlightenment, and death of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Built in the 9th century by the Sailendra Dynasty, Borobudur is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the world's largest Buddhist temple. Rituals include prayers, meditation, and the release of lanterns symbolizing enlightenment and peace.

BEYOND

SHAMANS, PSYCHEDELICS, AND ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

THE VEIL

Visions in the Dark: Shamanic Trance of the Paleolithic

INTO THE DEEP CAVERNS – A JOURNEY BEYOND DAYLIGHT

BY MASSIMO BONASORTE

In one of the most mysterious places, Chauvet Cave in France, torchlight flicks flicker and revivifies and illuminates the figures of haunted herds of rhinos and lions that are painted on a wall of a rock. On the other side of the world, in the Coso Range, the Petroglyphs are sunblistered in the canyons in California there are an untold number of animal petroglyphs: bighorn sheep, mysterious spirals, and zigzag lines chiseled in basalt. And in the rock shelters of Southern Africa, San (Bushman) artists painted the combinations of antelopes and people, in their odd, other-worldly manners. The common denominator among these far-beated locations is an extravagant suggestion: That a large part of prehistoric art depicts altered states of consciousness, which could have been the result of psychedelic trance or of very serious ritual action. Are the cave paintings and carvings of, say, 40,000 years ago good evidence of shamanic experience? Why do spirals, grids, zigzags, dots (recurring patterns) seem to manifest themselves in many cultures in the rock art, pointing at some common neurophysiological causes? This paper discusses the neuropsychological model of David Lewis-Williams and Jean Clottes associating entoptic phenomena (optical effects created on the retina) to prehistoric art and looks into solid archeological evidence (including more recent post 2020 discoveries) of the ritual use of psychoactive drugs and sensory interventions. Last of all, we address the question as to why these visionary experiences have been held in such high esteem in prehistoric cultures? The answer is in terms of spiritual affiliation, therapeutic healing, group affiliation, and cosmological understanding.

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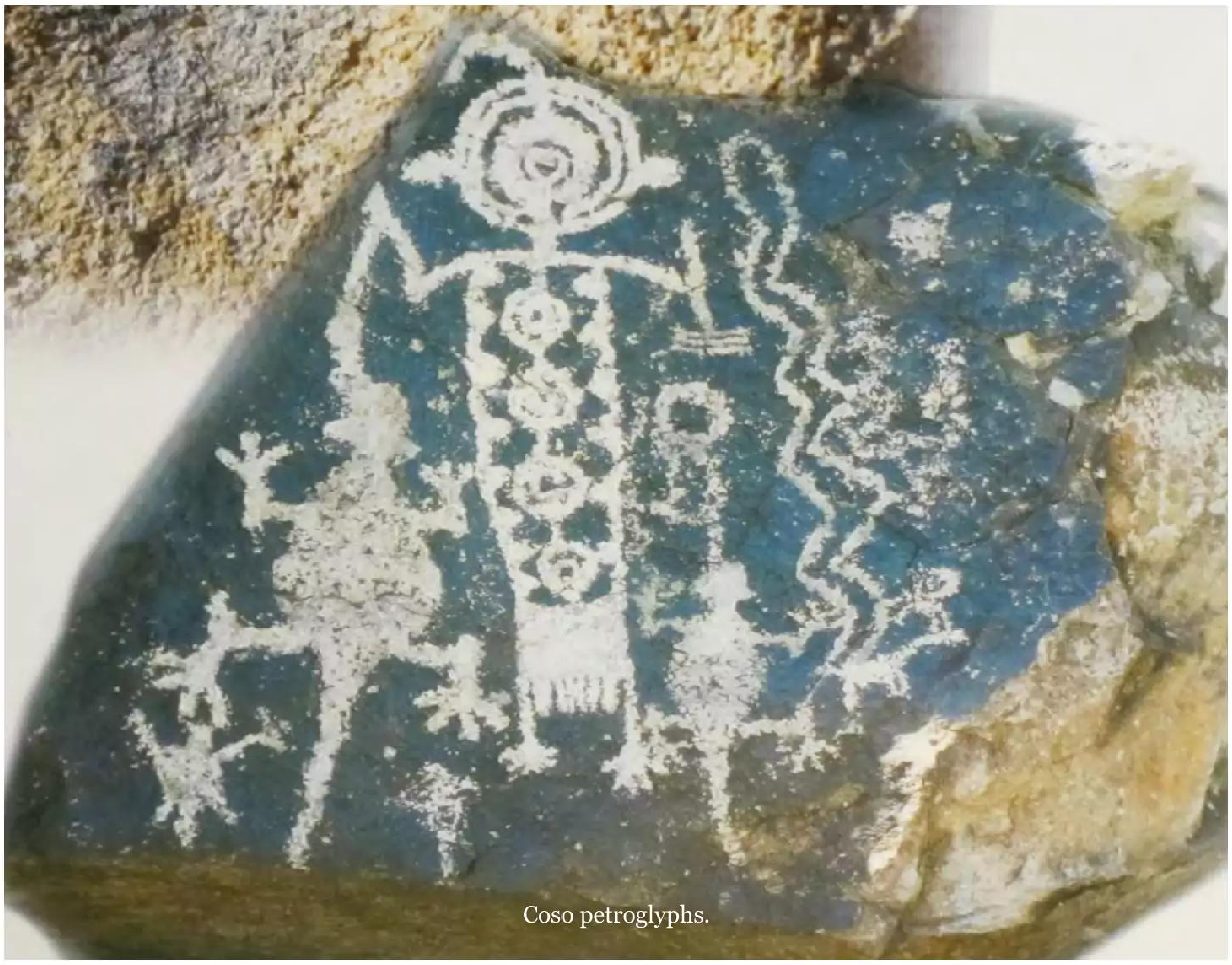
Neuropsychologica model of Entoptic Visions

ILewis-Williams and Clottes state that some non-figurative (abstract) designs on prehistoric art are best interpreted as the patterns of human visual system during altered states of consciousness. In laboratory experiments since 1960s, the volunteers intoxicated with LSD or mescaline indicated the initial phase of hallucination characterized by repetitive geometric geometry (a repetitive hallucination gained with sensory deprivation; rhythmic drumbeat; fasting; or ritual evoking a trance state). The seven popular types of these patterns of vision are



Coso petroglyphs.

very familiar: the grids, parallel lines, dots, zigzags, nested curves, meandering lines and spirals. Neurologists call such forms *phosphenes* or *entoptic phenomena* – imagery originating within the eye-brain system rather than from external light. For example, concentric circles or spirals may result from neurons firing in the visual cortex, while zigzagging "lightning" lines or lattices may derive from the structure of the retina. These patterns are essentially hard-wired form-constants of the human nervous system, visible to anyone who enters a trance state, whether via psychedelics, prolonged drumming and dancing, sensory deprivation, or even a sudden jolt (one archaeologist wryly noted he saw "Pow! Entoptics" after stubbing his toe heavily).

According to Lewis-Williams and colleagues, the prehistoric shamans or artists who had such visions created works of art displaying such entoptic shapes, sometimes as direct records of trance visions, and sometimes as intended symbolization of the visionary experience. Their three-stage model of neuropsychology is that the three are evident in cave art. In the Stage One, as explained, the practitioner observes entoptic patterns, i.e. the abstract lines, grids, zigzag, and dots that flicker and shape shift. The nonfigurative signs of the cave art were, probably, a part of this stage. However when the trance sets in the brain tries to organize the confusion. We get to Stage Two: construal wherein the mind begins converting the geometric figures to those which we recognize. The visual cortex, in the effort to make sense, may convert some mass of lines into,

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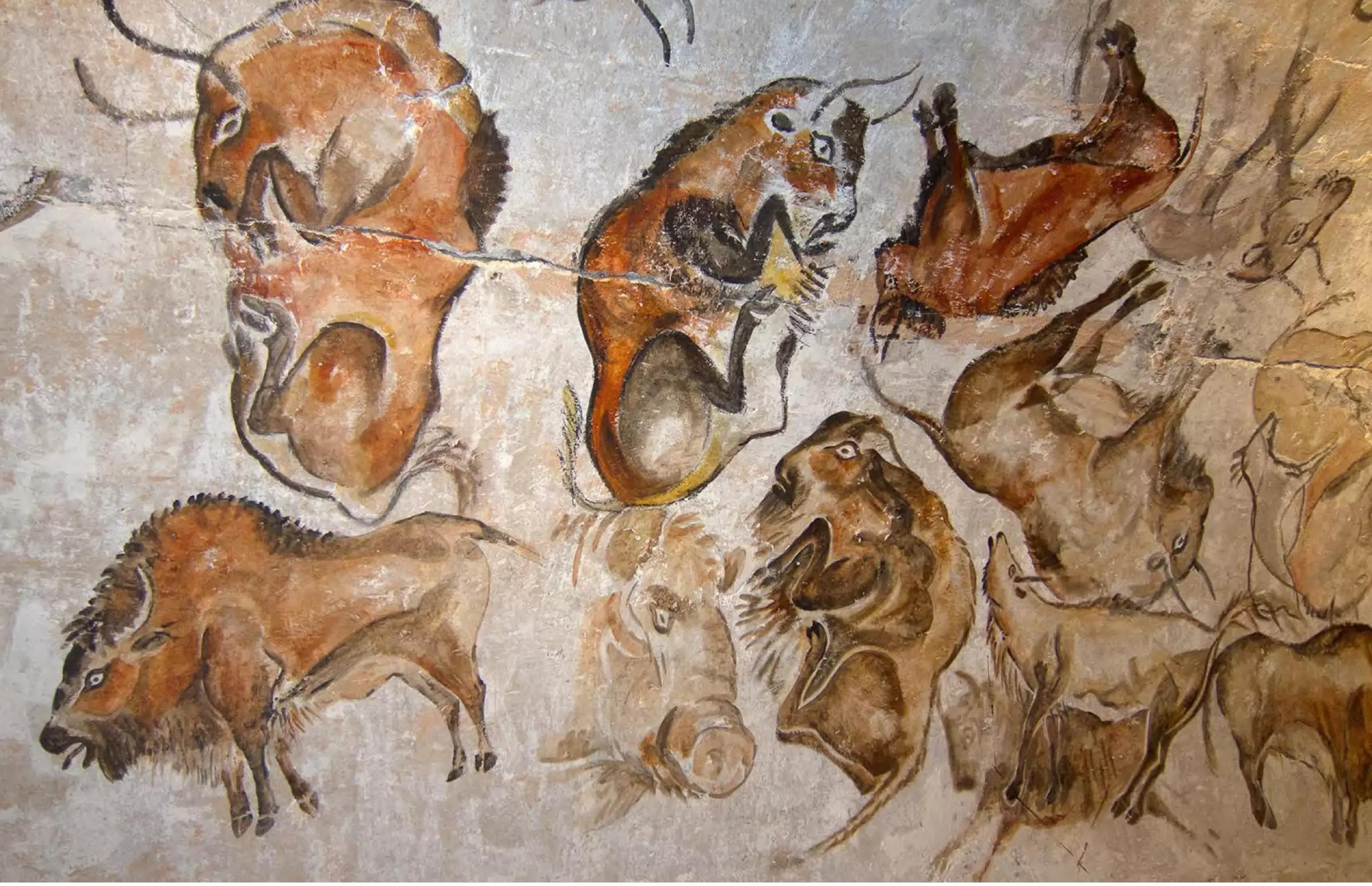
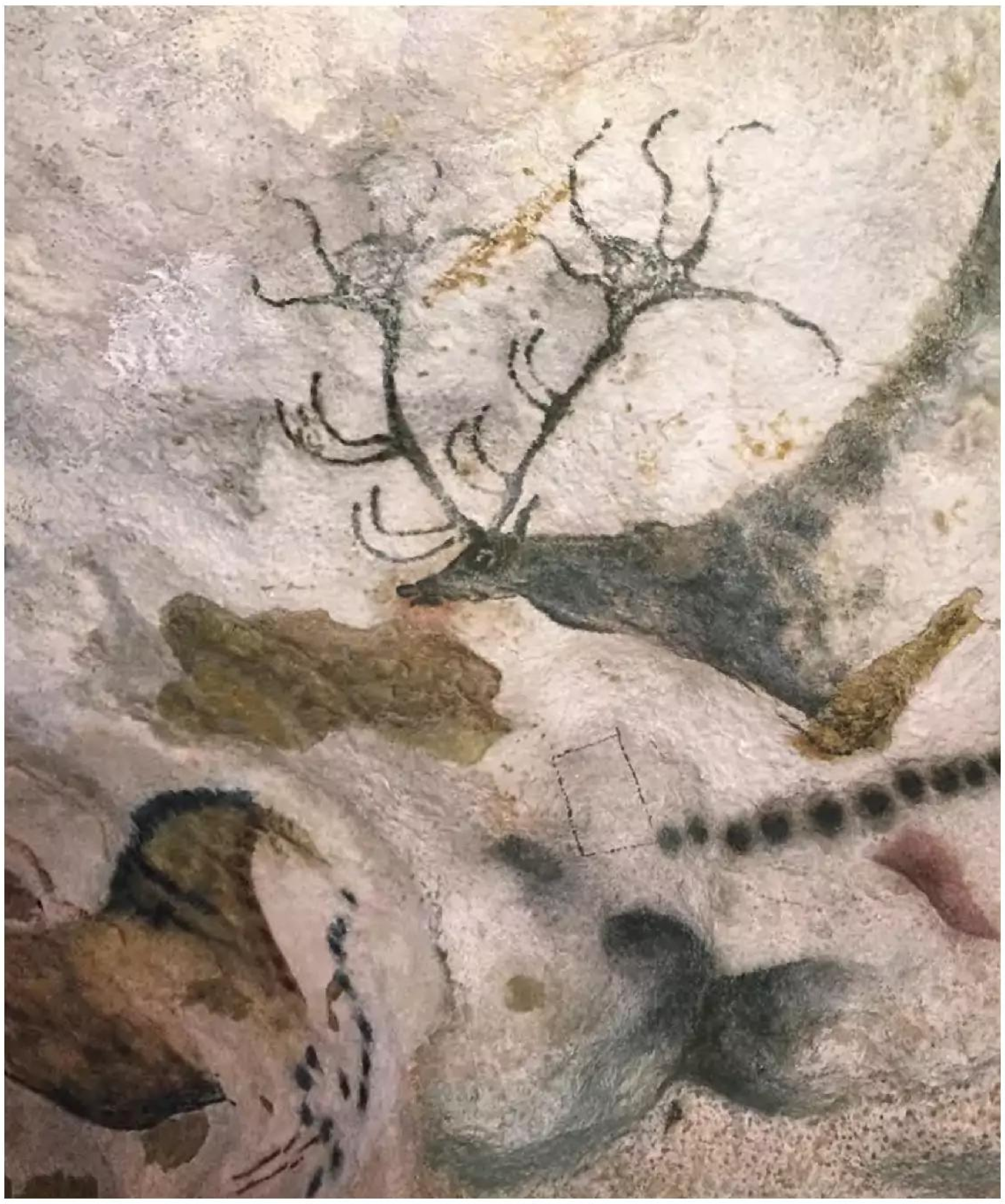
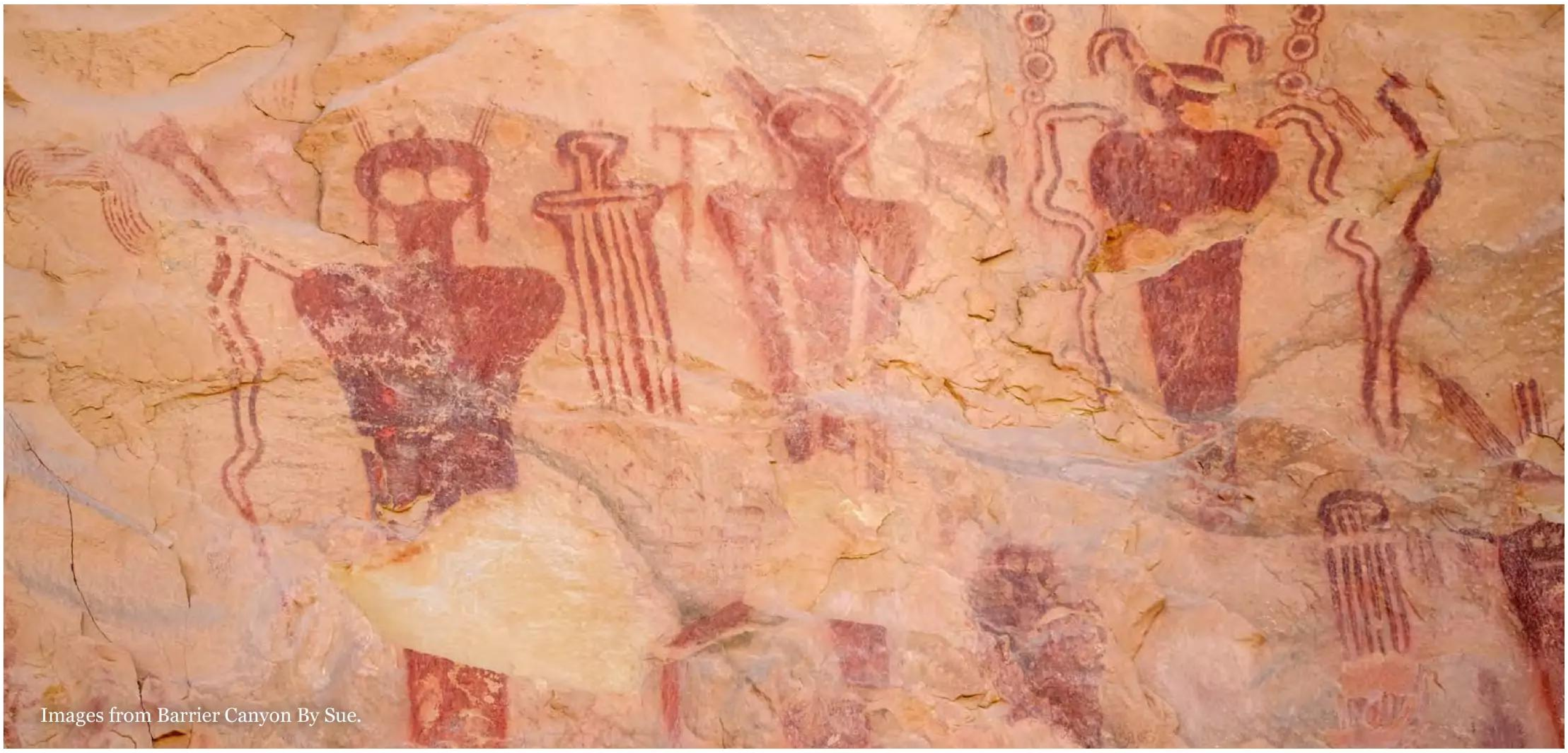
say, a spider or a net top; a group of points may all of a sudden appear as the spots on an animal hide. That may be the reason why the signs in some of the caves appear to communicate with the figurative shapes- lines framing or extending out of an animal (maybe suggesting supernatural power lines or breaths) or dots which have been positioned in key areas on the representations of the animals. what the art is, perhaps, is the half-way house at which random pattern takes on a symbolic meaning in the spell of cultural anticipation and expectancy.

At last there is Stage Three, the full-blown visionary experience. Shamans describe an irresistible experience of being in another reality during deep trance a sort of dynamic story world of hallucinations where they may meet gods and animal spirits, and monsters or undergo changes. Such experiences are tantalizingly hinted by the cave art. Composite figures and surreal scenes make up some of the most famous and enigmatic images, which are like dreaming, it is a story. The most dramatic of these is on the topmost (so-called Shaft of the Dead Man) deepest recess of Lascaux Cave with a spectral human figure, bird-headed, in a trance posture in front of a bison, with a pole-perched bird at its side. It is not the only scene suggesting that it might be a human with an avian face and a wounded beast, which was long subject to shamanic interpretations (probably it is a figure of a spirit flight or death-and-rebirth vision during a trance). More characteristic

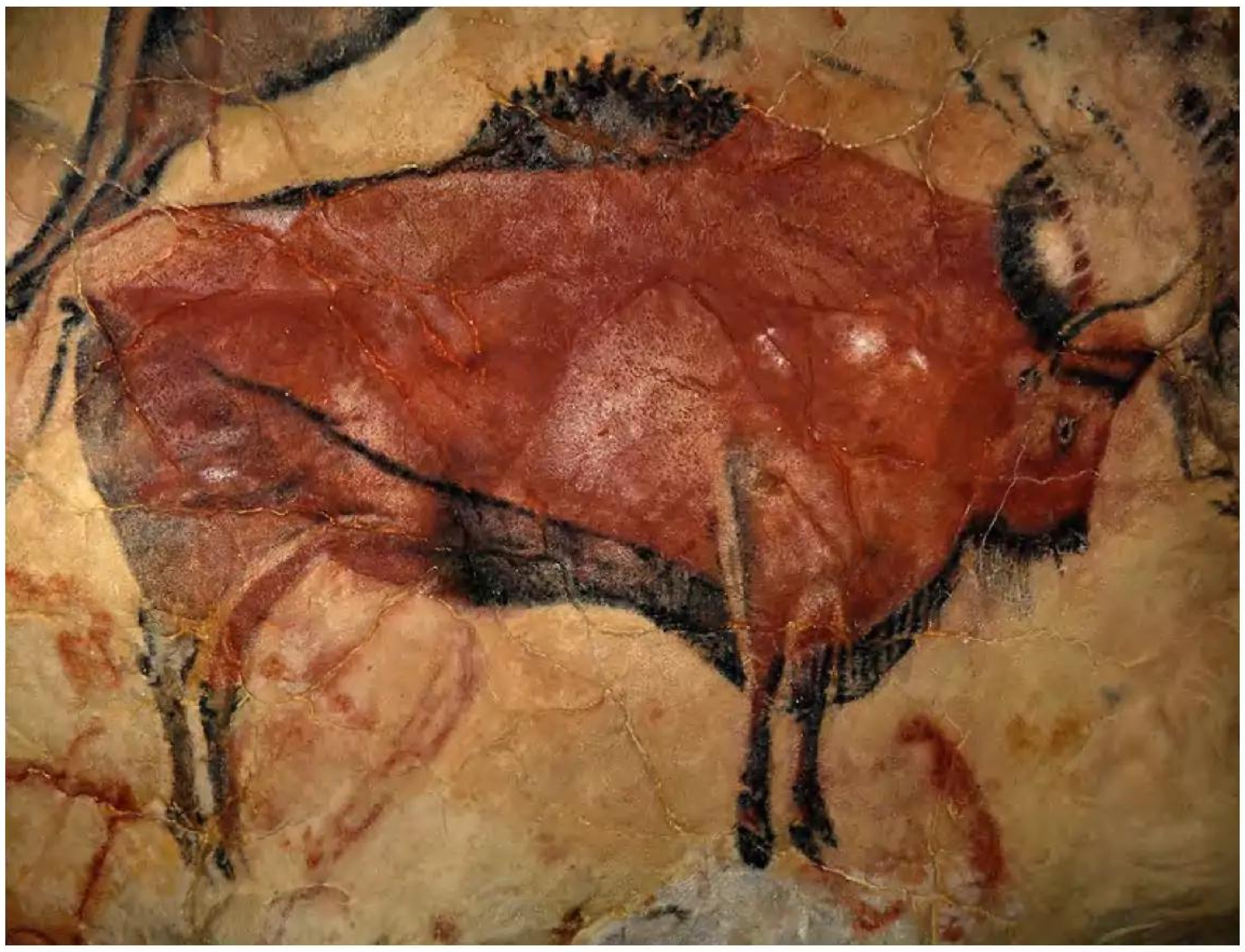


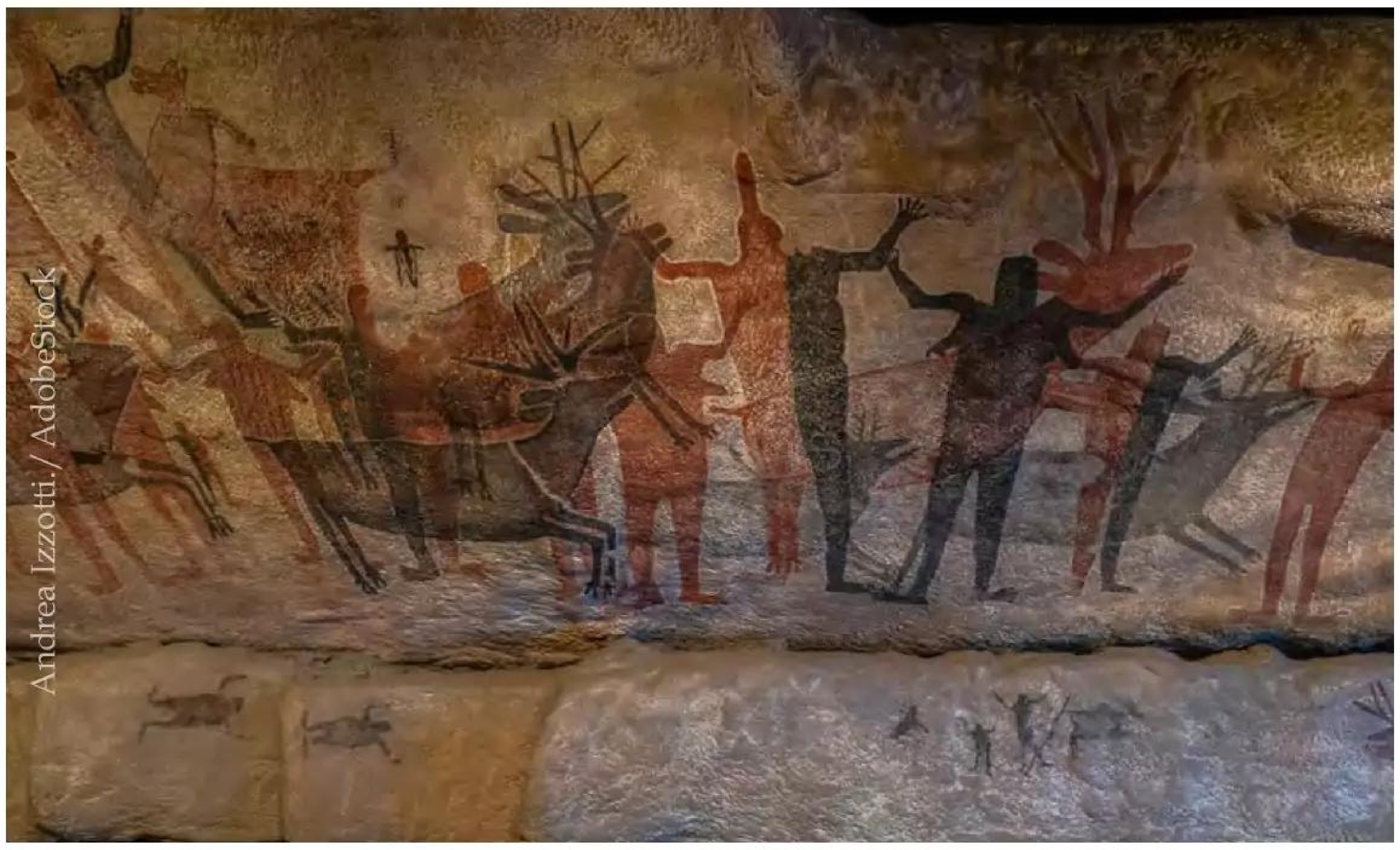


still is the so-called Sorcerer of Trois-Frres Cave: a painting of a rather naturalistic animal of sorts, part human (like erect body) but with stag-antlers and ears, owl eyes and horse wild-horse tail. More importantly, this model is also supported by the fact that some pictures are universal in rock art across cultures. The same geometric designs were spun out by independent prehistoric cultures, likewise unconnected to each other, which implies that these artists were latching on to innate visual effects of the brain. According to archaeologist David Whitley, grid-like patterns, nesting curves and spirals are everywhere in the boulders of Coso and other places, but otherwise purely devoid of recognizable meaning in the common sense. The fact that they are common, and can be likened to reports of the clinical hallucinations, is a strong argument supporting the entoptic hypothesis. As early as the 1950s, a German neuropsychologist by the name Max Knoll witnessed that electrically induced hallucinations in the visual sense bear the same resemblance to the patterns of common rock art in Africa. By 1970, psychologist Gerald



Images from Barrier Canyon By Sue.





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Oster wrote in *Scientific American* about the parallels between phosphenes and European cave art motifs. Lewis-Williams built on these insights, documenting the “seven common entoptic patterns” in San Bushman rock art of southern Africa and finding ethnographic evidence that San shamans entered trance to heal and to make rain, then recorded their visions on rock surfaces. Such observations bolster the idea that entoptic imagery was not random decoration but intentional recording of trance phenomena.

Trance Visions in the Desert

One of the most vivid test cases for this theory comes from the Coso Rock Art District in the Mojave Desert of California. Here, in canyons etched by long-vanished rivers, Indigenous artists pecked out tens of thousands of petroglyphs over millennia. Bighorn sheep abound in these carvings – but so do abstract symbols: concentric circles filled with grids “like a flattened fly’s eye,” snaking sine-wave lines across boulders, arcs of nested curves “like a fragment of a mammoth fingerprint”. Curvilinear meanders, hatchmarks, spiral forms and other “trippy, doodley” designs blanket the rock faces. For decades, archaeologists puzzled over these nonfigurative markings (suggesting everything from solstice calendars to hunting tallies), but no consensus

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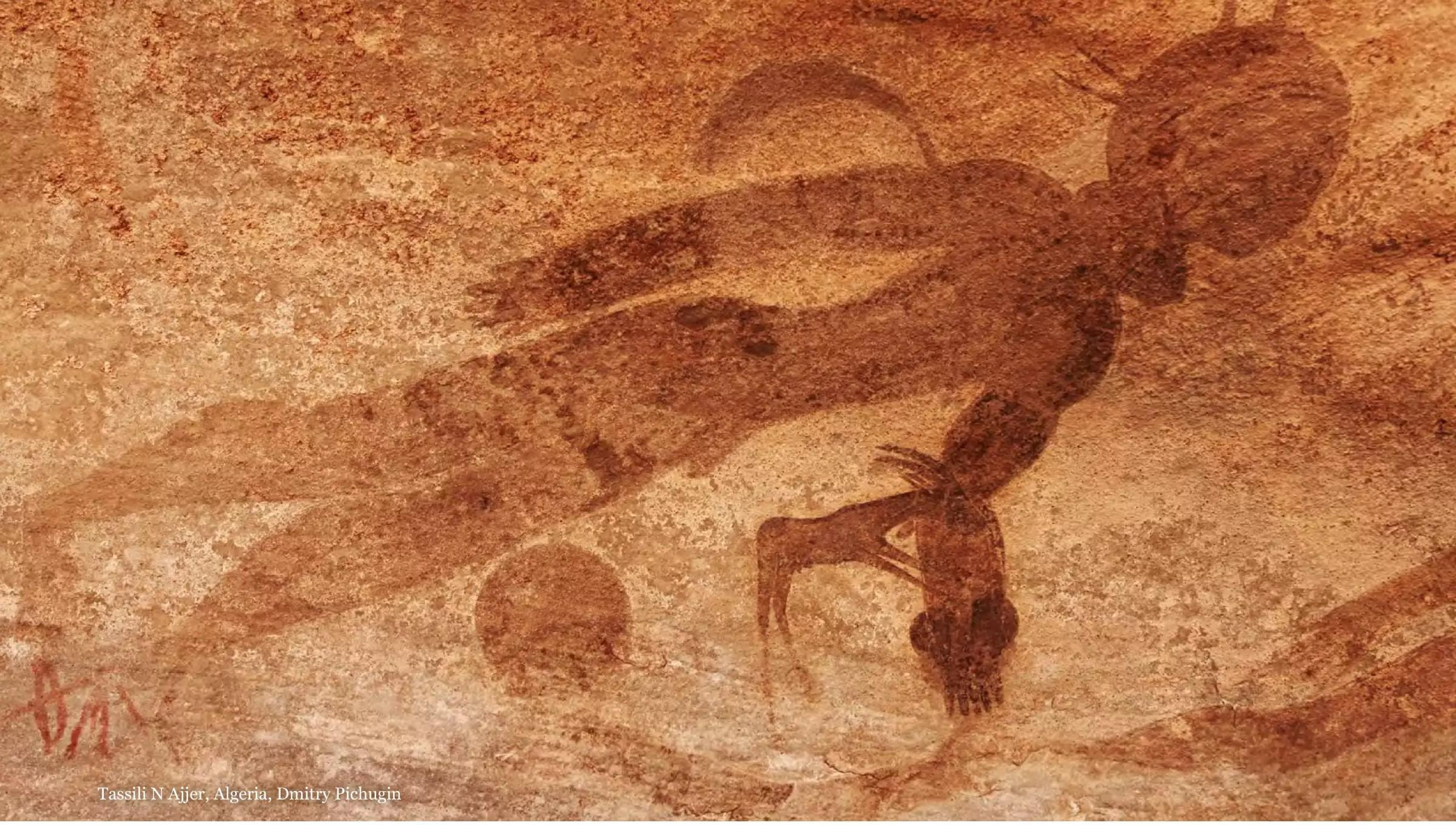
emerged. Today, researchers interpret many of these Coso motifs as classic entoptic patterns, carved by shamans during or after trance rituals. Indeed, local Numic-speaking peoples (the Paiute and Shoshone) believed that shamans must not forget the visions they encountered during their supernatural journeys – if they forgot, they might die. This provided a "powerful incentive to jot them down" on stone. In other words, Coso's dizzying array of grids, zigzags, and nested curves may be a permanent notepad of visions, a communal spiritual record on the living rock. Importantly, the shamans of the Coso and Great Basin region did not necessarily ingest psychedelic plants like peyote or Datura to induce their trance states. Ethnographic records indicate their routes to trance relied on other methods: exceptionally potent tobacco, sleep deprivation, prolonged fasting, isolation in the silent canyons, and intense prayer or chanting. The canyons themselves, "mute as tombs" in their stillness, likely aided sensory deprivation. Focusing on pain or exhaustion could also trigger hallucinations – one account tells of shamans who danced and went without rest to collapse into vision states. Through these means, Coso ritual specialists sought guidance for community needs such as rainmaking or healing. In the parched desert, rain was a precious and mystical commodity. Rock art researcher David Whitley identified the desert bighorn sheep as a rain shaman's spirit guide, and noted that some Coso shamans traveled great distances on vision quests for rain. In this inverted logic of sympathetic magic, the dry canyon world was symbolically "inverted" to a wet, fertile spirit realm where shamans communed with rain-bringing powers. Several Coso images seem to illustrate the multi-stage trance that shamans experienced. For example, Whitley points out a petroglyph of a bighorn sheep whose body is overlain by three arcing parallel lines "rainbowlike" from head to tail. These unusual arcs have no obvious anatomical purpose – they appear to be an entoptic form (Stage 1 "nested curves") that the shaman-artist saw and then incorporated into the sheep's form as supernatural horns. The horns in the carving are larger and more numerous than any real sheep's, hinting that the entoptic pattern came first and was "decoded" as extra horns during the vision. Nearby, a far more fantastical figure combines human and animal features: a therianthrope that looks part human, part bird, part ram. It has an upright human posture but sports large curved horns and bird-like talons in place of feet. Tellingly, the figure has six fingers on one hand – a detail clearly "not a normal individual," but matching common hallucinations of extra body parts in trance. According to Whitley and Lewis-Williams's interpretation, this petroglyph is a Stage 3 vision: the shaman's soul depicted as transforming into his animal spirit helpers. The horns are



Tassili N Ajjer, Algeria, Dmitry Pichugin

not a mundane hunting disguise (as earlier scholars once thought – local Native people actually refuted that notion); rather, the horns represent the shaman taking on the power of the ram/sheep spirit in the other world. The bird-like talons similarly may symbolize the shaman's feeling of flight – a common metaphor for the out-of-body experience in deep trance. Many therianthrope carvings in the Far West even show human figures with wings or bird heads, evoking the sensation of floating or flying out of one's body reported in shamanic ecstasy. In sum, the Coso rock art provides a rich tableau of entoptic patterns and trance figures, underscoring how deeply altered consciousness experiences were woven into the region's spiritual life. Recently, there has been some material evidence found by archeologists as to the associations of hallucinations with the Californian rock art. There was a breakthrough with Pinwheel Cave in Southern California in 2020, very close to Coso. Researchers

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Rick Bury, The stydy of Pinwheel Cave, in California.

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saw a pictograph on the ceiling of the cave that appeared similar to the pinwheel-like flower of Datura wrightii (Sacred Datura) a psychoactive plant used by the local tribes. Excavation confirmed the relation: they arrived at a good many chewed plant quids buried in nooks in the cave, each a ball of fiber. These quids were found to be of Datura; had been prepared by a chemical and microscopic examination; reverse sucking and chewed, apparently on account of the movements it contains, under the alkaloid influences of Datura. Published in 2020, this is the first positive evidence of the consumption of hallucinogens at a rock art site, its authors said. It is a clear-cut connection of a ritual of hallucinogenic experience with a piece of rock art: here, it is a rock art of the flower of Datura itself, and not of any of the visions evoked by this flower. The scientists imply that the Native people went to the extent of painting the plant as part of their adoration of the plant, and that too at the place of its consumption in community gatherings. Datura was, ethnographically, indeed in use in California in the rites of adolescent initiation and in the vision quests: a potent and hazardous intoxicant capable of sensational hallucinations and of ordeals to young people. Find in the Pinwheel Cave confirms the connection between consumption of hallucinogens and making rock art as it has been stated by archaeologist David Robinson that used psychedelic plants were indeed a source of creative inspiration and a central part of important rituals and group gathering among these peoples. That is, Datura was not some covert activity of an individual, rather it was a tradition shared by the community and rock art was one of the centerpieces of the action, perhaps a part of the education. The Pinwheel Cave evidence validates long-held suspicions and lends scientific credence to the idea that some prehistoric art was created in situ during drug-fueled trance rituals.

Darkness, Hypoxia, and Spirit Worlds

Arminius proved to be a shrewd The painted native caves in Upper Paleolithic Europe (Chauvet, Lascaux, and Trois Freres in France, or Altamira in Spain) represent another location with somehow related to each other patterns interestingly enough. Mostly figurative (images of horses, bison, mammoths, stencils of human hands etc.), the famous cave paintings were created between 30,000 and 15,000 years ago and contain certain abstract marks with mystical meanings. In numerous caves dots and dashes, zigzag lines and grids, curving shapes are found in combination with animal figures. Such as, in Lascaux a series of black dots separates a rhino and a scene held with a fallen man and wounded bison in a deep shaft of

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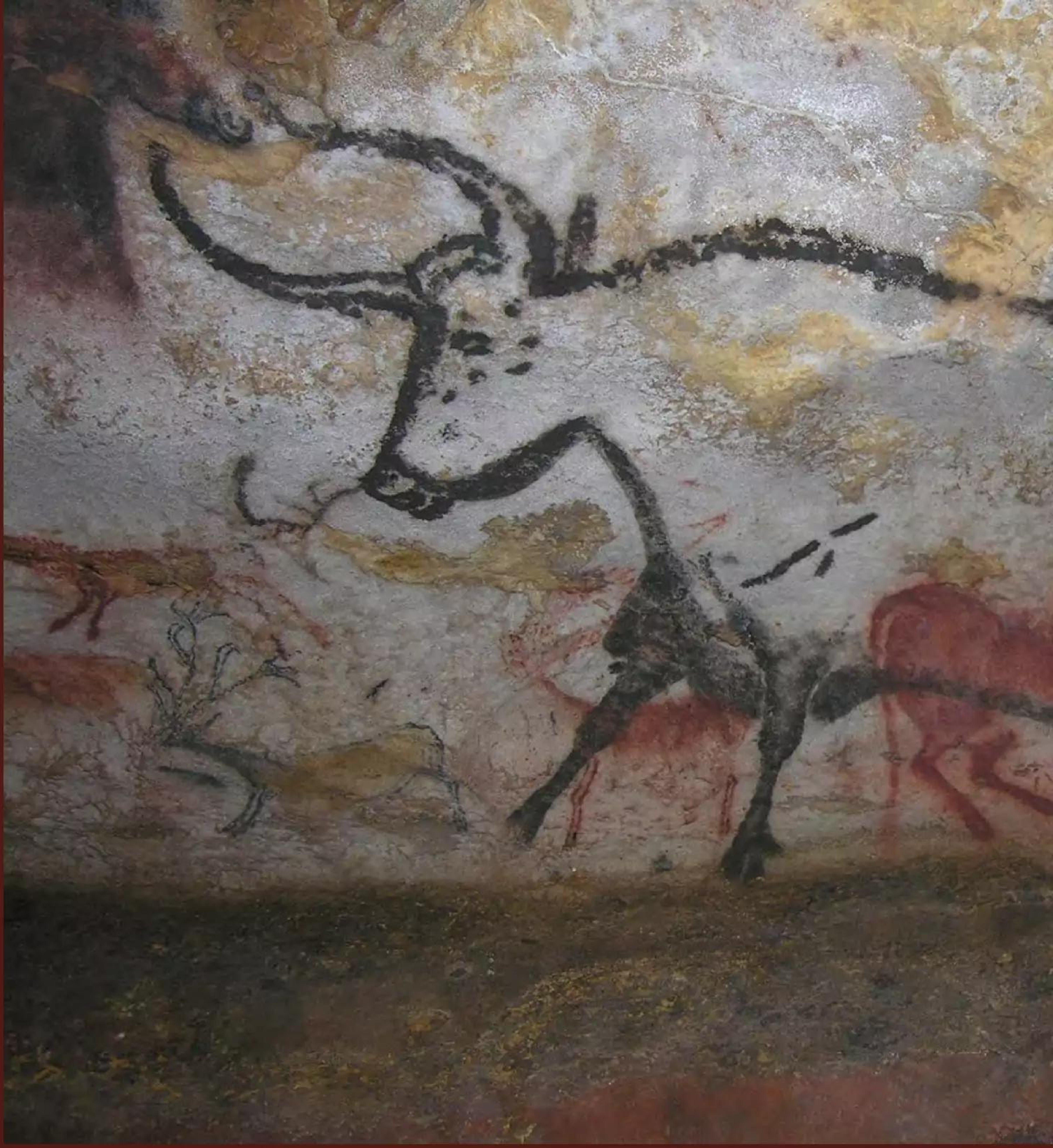
the cave. These nonrepresentational motifs are also found across the Paleolithic cave art and they had ever served as one of the most difficult aspects to explain. One explanation may be found in the so-called entoptic hypothesis, according to which they are the same geometric phosphenes which manifest themselves in trance visions. According to preeminent French prehistorian Jean Clottes, without written statements to go on, the interpretation of Paleolithic art requires an appeal to what Clottes calls “the universality of the human mind” (the universals of neurophysiology as well as of the human mind more broadly) and to cross-cultural comparisons. The cave art was associated with the vision-seeking or shamanism hunches which became popular in the 90s when Clottes and Lewis-Williams postulated that they were created to facilitate shamanic ceremonies in the caves. To these scholars, the cave conditions serve as a conscious path into altered states: submerged, dark, quiet rooms that can only be accessed dim torchlight create the impression of entry to another dimension.

New research studies have introduced a dramatic dimension to this perception; oxygen deprivation. A group of researchers created a simulated situation in 2021 where torches were used, in closed cave environments, and determined that in the same scenario, the oxygen would have dropped drastically, leading to hypoxia (oxygen starvation) to the cave painters. Hypoxia has been known to cause the release of dopamine in the brain, which produces hallucination, out of body experience, and euphoria. The authors of the study assume that already the people of the Upper Paleolithic deliberately ventured down deep cave sources such as the so-called Apse of Lascaux or the most back of Chauvet where they were mindful that the air would become thinner and visions would occur. According to the researchers, the cave was defined as a liminal space and an ontological arena of the transformational experiences. Breeding in the choking smoke and pitch black, these ancient artists could have been trying to “remain linked to the universe”. According to this, the cave as such was a sacred trance container; the process of decorating its walls was an addition to a generational trance while one is connected universe. The style that decorated the caves did not make them meaningful, but it was because of this meaning that was placed on the caves that were chosen that made them decorated. According to the hypoxia study, the choice of the caves made them significant and that is why they were decorated. That is, some of these caves, due to depth of cave / echo effect / psychological effect related reasons, may have been thought of as spiritual gateways and as such were probably sacred places and then that is why people dared to go that far into the cave to make art works there. The shamanistic interpretation of the imagery of the European caves can be read as well. Examples are perhaps the most compelling with the bird-headed man of Lascaux being painted in a narrow shaft that could only be reached by using a ladder. This stick figure-looking human, with a bird head (or mask) appears to lie in a prone position beside a wounded bison, a bird on a staff, and a rhinoceros. Although it was mostly viewed in the beginning as a scene of hunting accident, some scholars (including Lewis-Williams) indicate that it shows a shaman in a trance state but not a real life scene. Even the unrealistically erect phallus of the man be comes difficult to explain in a straightforward hunting narrative but is credible by reports of physical arousal during ecstatic trance experiences. His head in bird-like features may hint at the spirit journey of a shaman, it may be his soul depicted in form of a bird leaving his body. The members with effigy of a bird at the top could be a cult object. And the bison pouring out its guts might be the kind of visionary experience with an animal spirit that could be the spirit helper of the shaman or an antagonist in the otherworld. This entire tableaux, buried deep in the caves of Lascaux, had a very serious religious implication, perhaps. Very importantly, there was a row of three pairs of dots, which had been painted between rhino and man-bison scene. It is possible that these dots are not just aesthetic feature: they correspond to the entoptic dots seen on other occasions, so such a scene incorporates not only patterns that are hallucination-driven but also content. The Lascaux shaft scene is mysterious enough to lead paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey to write that the concurrence of geometric elements (dots, grids, zigzags) with depictive art is suggestive



that more was going on than mere hunting magic. Another celebrated image, known as "The Sorcerer" of Trois Frères Cave, reinforces the trance interpretation. This painting (and engraving) shows a hybrid creature with antlered deer or ibex horns, the ears and face of perhaps an owl, human-like arms, and lower body parts of different animals – a truly chimeric being. It occupies a high, remote recess of the cave. Since its discovery, researchers have variously deemed it a god of animals, a masked dancer, or a master shaman. The shamans-of-prehistory hypothesis holds that such therianthropic figures are shamans in the act of transforming. They visually convey the concept of a person taking on animal attributes to commune with animal spirits. Notably, the composite figures in European art are rare which suggests they had special status, likely mythological or ritual. Their rarity and placement in hard-to-access cave locales echo the idea that they were part of secret or sacred rites. In Chauvet Cave's far chamber, for instance, an image dubbed the "Venus and the Sorcerer" pairs a stylized female lower body with a bison-like upper body on a stalactite, perhaps depicting a ritual merging of human and animal realms. While we cannot "prove" the meaning of these scenes, many experts think they may have been created within the framework of shamanic beliefs and practices.

The entoptic model adds that even the abstract clusters of dots, lines, and geometric signs found near these figures could be the artists' attempt to record the backdrop of visual effects that enveloped them during trance. Thus, European cave art might encode both the visions (abstract patterns) and the vision narratives (shamanic encounters with animal spirits), all in one grand prehistoric canvas.

Trance and Substances: Archaeological Evidence of Psychoactive Rituals

Although, the alteration of the states of consciousness can be achieved without the use of drugs, as it was held with the help of drumming, fasting, and so on, as the San and the Coso experiments demonstrate, quite a few different cultures made use of psychoactive plants and fungi as a means to unlock the "Doors of Perception." Archaeology is also starting to produce hard evidence of such

practices in early prehistory, and frequently in a ritualized context that relates to art or even to burials. We have observed already the situation of the Datura at Pinwheel Cave (California) some time around AD 12001800, which depicts community hallucinogenic ceremonies at a rock art site. Other hallucinogens were taken in the wider American west and even described. An example here is that of Peyote cactus (Lophophora williamsii) which has mescaline (a strong psychedelic). But dried peyote buttons were found in south Texas cave dating back to approximately 5,700 years ago, an early direct evidence of psychotropic drug use in North America. These were further validated by use of chemical analysis that proved the existence of mescaline thus indicating that these ancient people took into consideration the mind-altering effects of peyote more than 4th millennium BC. Findings of rock art were not made near the remains of those specific peyote users, but the geographical background (Lower Pecos region) is a place of rich Pecos River style rock paintings. It is possible that some scholars view peyote imagery in that rock art, for instance, some starburst designs or flower models which remind of the cactus, and shaman characters with bulging or visionary eyes. A strong analogy can be drawn with the Huichol of Mexico, who performed peyote rituals and also depicted peyote, deer, and serpents in symbolic nexus in their art (observed by researchers such as Carolyn Boyd with respect to the prehistoric Pecos River murals). Though direct proof of peyote use by the Pecos River artists remains elusive, the Texas cave find firmly establishes that Paleo-Indians were consuming peyote by 4000 BC, supporting the idea that mescaline-fueled visions could have influenced the region's ancient art. Another strong but long-established visionary compound is the psilocybin mushrooms. In Europe, an outstanding rock painting at Selva Pascuala in Spain (approximately 6,000 years old), a row of mushroom-like figures is depicted very close to a wild bull. These have been identified as perhaps Psilocybe hispanica, a local psychoactive mushroom by ethnomycologists. In the event that the interpretation is right, it would be the first representation of magic mushrooms in European art. The best-known example of the mushroom men is perhaps the so-called mushroom shaman, part of a series of cave paintings at the Tassili n Ajjer (Algeria, c 7000 5000 BC). This has been attributed to show that Saharan Neolithic cultures entertained rituals of psychotropic fungi (probably species of Psilocybe or Panaeolus, which thrive after rains). They are not universally accepted, but their images interestingly relate to later practices that have been found in African societies in which plant entheogens have been used. At least, they reinforce the argument that repeated patterns of either dots or the spore-like speckles around individuals could represent trance or intoxication phenomenon in rock art. An extraordinary find among the Spanish ancient samples of hair hit the headlines in 2022: scientists studying the strands of human hair in a Bronze Age cave burial at Menorca (c. 3,000 years ago) found a mix of alkaloid drugs. The drugs contained were scopolamine and atropine - powerful hallucinogens of the nightshade family (Solanaceae) and ephedrine, a stimulant. These findings validate the fact that by

Tassili, dancers.

the later prehistory European societies were actively utilising a variety of psychoactive plants, most probably henbane/mandrake (the tropane alkaloid system) and Ephedra (ephedrine). Although several millennia removed is a cave painter in the Paleolithic, it shows a proof of concept that this was one of the part of the ritual toolkits. These authors of the study observe that these identified Solanaceae alkaloids are not applicable to conventional pain management, they are too strong in their psychic and psychoactive effects to serve this purpose, they were rather pertinent to shamanic ecstasy, divination, and ritual. It is not unrealistic to assume that hunter-gatherers earlier, also being quite inquisitive and watchful of their surroundings, were North Africans and found the same mind-altering qualities. The plants in question (e.g. Datura stramonium, Deadly Nightshade (Atropa), Henbane (Hyoscyamus), Mandrake (Mandragora)) are indigenous or naturalized to some parts of Europe and to the Mediterranean basin and have a long history of use as entheogens (spirit medicines) in the Old World. A sniff of burning henbane seeds or a gulp of mandrake root drink might set the dizziness, visions of flight and communication with animal spirits which later folklore (the flying ointment of the witches in the Middle Ages) records in graphic detail. One cannot help wondering

San Jose del Guaviare, Colombia.By Jhampier

whether a Paleolithic ritual expert could have mixed-up a similar herbal brew as an opener to sending off his soul, and then going to draw visions on a cave wall. Concrete evidence for such Paleolithic pharmacopeia is starting to emerge. In Morocco's Grotte des Pigeons (Taforalt), archaeologists recently identified 15,000-year-old remains of Ephedra twigs and charred seeds concentrated around a human burial. Ephedra is not a hallucinogen in the classic sense – it contains ephedrine, a stimulant that can heighten alertness and physical endurance – but it may have been valued for providing the energy and focus for prolonged rituals. The context at Taforalt suggests the plant was "processed and consumed", and its presence in a ritual burial implies it played a "significant role" in ceremonial activity. Stimulants can also synergize with trance induction by promoting prolonged dancing or wakefulness to the point of hallucination (as seen in some indigenous ceremonies that use tobacco or caffeine-rich holly in the build-up to visionary states). Another clue comes not from preserved plant remains but from ancient imagery: A rock mural at Selva Pascuala in Spain (estimated 6,000–8,000 years old) appears to depict a row of tall mushrooms with bell-shaped caps next to a bull. Mycologists who studied the painting suggest these are likely Psilocybe mushrooms – specifically Psilocybe hispanica, a local psychoactive species – making it possibly the oldest image of fungi with presumed entheogenic use in Europe. The implication is that knowledge of mind-altering mushrooms could reach far back into the Upper Paleolithic. Psychedelic Psilocybes (like today's "liberty caps" or their dung-loving cousins) would have been available on the steppes and forests of Ice Age Europe, growing from animal dung or damp soil. Even the iconic red-and-white Amanita muscaria toadstool, famed in Siberian shamanism, ranged

gerasimov174/ AdobeStock

Cave art from Australia, Wondjina.

across boreal zones of Eurasia and could have been noticed by Late Pleistocene foragers. Though Amanita's use in Paleolithic Europe is speculative, its later significance to shamanic cosmologies (e.g. among Siberian tribes or perhaps in circumpolar mythology) raises the possibility that Eurasian hunter-gatherers had long experimented with it. The reindeer herds depicted in caves, interestingly, are known to nibble on Amanita muscaria – a fact not lost on Siberian shamans, who sometimes consumed the urine of Amanita-intoxicated reindeer to induce their own trance. Could Ice Age Europeans have observed something similar? We may never have direct proof, but the circumstantial web of archaeobotany and myth hints that the "spirit world" entered in caves might also have flowed from psychoactive brews and smokes prepared by those ancient ritualists. Asia too contributes to this story: notable discoveries include THC residues of cannabis on 2,500-year-old braziers from a burial in Xinjiang, China (suggesting inhalation of marijuana smoke during ceremonies), and traces of Ayahuasca admixture substances in contexts associated with South American rock art. In the Andes, snuff trays and pipes from several thousand years ago contain DMT-bearing plant residues, linking to visionary rock art motifs in the Atacama and Amazon regions. And in Oceania, Aboriginal Australian rock art often depicts "yam spirit" beings and otherworldly figures; while the Aboriginal trance is typically achieved by song and dance, some groups also use pituri (Duboisia hopwoodii), a nicotine-containing plant, to induce trance and visons. Thus, a global picture emerges: wherever psychoactive flora or fungi were available, ancient peoples found them and used them in ritual contexts – sometimes leaving physical evidence, and other times encoding their mind-bending experiences in painted or carved symbols.

Between Hypothesis and Evidence

The news of the Varus Disaster (*clades Variana*, as the Romans called it) reached the Roman world with stunning Because it would be impossible to establish the definite meaning and interpretation of the prehistoric artwork using psychedelic or trance experiences. Nothing is more interesting than the idea, which is backed up by increasingly interdisciplinary evidence, yet there are caveats. On the one side, the combination of neuroscience, ethnography and archeology is fairly convincing. The modern experimental entoptic phenomena and form-constants exactly fit to the way modern experiments (psychedelics, or sensory-deprivation) have rediscovered the geometric patterns of far-flung rock art traditions. Those patterns are given cultural context by ethnographic analogy, as in the San testifying to painting what they see in trance, orNative Californians writing down visions to prevent sickness. Further, direct archaeological evidence (such as hallucinogenic quids, drug traces in human hair, or ancient art of psychoactive species) of course strongly confirms that consciousness alteration was part of the prehistoric tool kit. Lines of evidence tend to strengthen one another, creating a collectiveness that at least some prehistoric art was actually produced by people in altered states depicting that which they experienced. On the other hand, archaeologists caution against uncritical or one-size-fits-all interpretations. Not every dot or spiral in cave art must be a “trance phospene”; some may have unrelated symbolic meanings or practical functions (like simple tallies, maps, or clan marks). The

shamanistic interpretation has been very influential – perhaps too influential, according to critics like Paul Bahn, who wryly titled a paper “Save the Last Trance for Me” in caution against overuse of shamanic explanations. One concern is that invoking universal neurobiology might gloss over unique cultural contexts. For instance, two cultures might paint similar zigzags for entirely different reasons – one from migraines or trance, another as a water symbol or merely decorative pattern. Scholars also debate whether shamanism itself can be projected back to Paleolithic times. Shamanic practices are known worldwide in historic Indigenous societies, but we lack direct proof of “shamans” in Upper Paleolithic Europe aside from the speculative art interpretations. As Clottes himself acknowledges, we are relying on the “universality of the human mind” as a guiding principle. This is a reasonable approach (our brains and cognitive capacities have changed little in 40,000 years), yet it is not infallible. In spite of these difficulties, the trance-painting hypothesis has encouraged profitable scientific research. It urges archaeologists to employ new techniques: across a spectrum of techniques, including the digital image enhancement of dim cave artworks up to the biochemical testing of micro-remains to go in search of material correlates of ancient brainpower. An example of making use of rock art analysis, ethnobotany and chemistry together was a project on the Pinwheel Cave that aimed to “reconnect material remains, art, narrative and people across space and time”. These projects demonstrate the efficiency of a multidisciplinary method in transforming ideas that were conceived as fantasy, into the testable hypotheses. Instead of approaching the question of altered states as unscientific, the creative researchers are settling down to explore tensions with creativity. Even the hypoxia study in caves shows the rigor that has come to this area simulating Paleolithic torch use and determining the amount of oxygen, a very empirical test armed by a theoretical question as to why caves were used. The findings of these studies are all going in the same direction to state the point that the prehistoric ritual life of attaining altered states of being whether chemically, physically, or sensory responses was a major part of the ritual territory of these cultures and that it expressed that in the archaeological record. To sum up, the idea that prehistoric art represents psychedelic trance is not only believable, but increasingly in line with evidence from science and anthropology. It creates an image of ancient life in which such visionary experiences were valued as sources of power, healing, and wisdom; in which shamans (or their equivalent) led communities according to what they "saw" beyond the visible; and in which to make art was, itself, a sacred act — an extension of vision that bound individuals to one another, to nature's creatures, and to the cosmos. Far from "altered" in a marginal sense of the term, these states were central to the human enterprise, and imprinted their message on the walls of caves and cliffs, to wait millennia before they bequeathed their message: that creativity and spirituality are knitted into fabric of the human story. ■

Crow Canyon Petroglyphs, located near Bloomfield, New Mexico by kojihirano.

THE DELPHIC ORACLE

Pythia, Prophecy, and the Science Behind the Shrine

BY MASSIMO BONASORTE

Tomas Marek / AdobeStock

> *"I warn you, whoever you are. Oh, you who wish to probe the mysteries of Nature, if you cannot find what you seek within yourself, you will not find it outside either. If you ignore the wonders of your home, how can you expect to find other wonders? The Treasure of the Gods is hidden within you. Oh, man, know yourself and you will know the Universe of the Gods."*
>
> – Oracle of Delphi

The Oracle of Delphi was regarded by ancient Greeks as the omphalos, the "navel of the world," with a lineage shrouded in myth and antiquity. Long before Apollo's cult arrived, the site may have been sacred to an Earth goddess (Gaia) and Themis, reflecting an age when female deities and prophetesses presided. According to legend, Apollo seized Delphi by slaying the serpent-dragon Python, the guardian of Gaia's shrine. The very name "Pythia" derives from pythein, "to rot," referencing the decaying body of Python and forever linking the priestess to Apollo's triumph. Historically, Delphi's influence grew from humble Mycenaean roots (c. 1400–1100 BCE) into a Panhellenic sanctuary by the 8th century BCE. By this time, Apollo was worshipped as the god of prophecy, and a local woman known as the Pythia served as his mouthpiece. From around the 8th century through the Classical period, the Delphic Oracle's pronouncements were sought on matters ranging from city-state laws to colonization and war. No major decision was made in the Greek world without consulting Delphi's priestess first. The oracle's prestige continued into the Hellenistic and Roman eras, albeit with fluctuations. By the 1st century CE, observers like Plutarch noted a decline in activity, and by the late 4th century CE the oracle fell silent as Christianity ascended. A famous final oracle, reportedly delivered to Emperor Julian in 362 CE, lamented that Apollo's prophetic shrine had fallen and "the speaking water [of the sacred spring] has been silenced". Thus ended a roughly thousand-year span in which Delphi's voice guided ancient civilization.

The Pythia: Priestess and Rituals of Prophecy

In 387 BCE when the Gauls lln the Homeric Hymns (a collection of thirty-three hymns celebrating individual gods, attributed to Homer on the basis of style and meter), mention is also made of a female serpent, "drakaina" or dolphin, the guardian of the sanctuary. The term Pythoness (from the Late Latin pythonissa) refers to the sorceress "who predicted the future possessed by a demon called Python": '[The enemy dragoness] was transformed into a snake of Apollo, and the Pythia, the priestess who prophesied at Delphi, took her name. Many depictions show the serpent Python living peacefully alongside Apollo, both guarding the omphalos'. (Kárl Kerényi, The Gods of the Greeks,).

The Pythia herself stood at the center of Delphic tradition – part priestess, part prophetess. Diodorus Siculus (1st century BCE) states that initially the role of Pythia was reserved for virgins, but after Echecrates of Thessaly kidnapped and raped the seer with whom he had fallen in love, it was decreed by law that no virgin would ever prophesy again. The role was thus reserved for mature women who would continue to wear the robes of virgins in memory of the original priestesses. Ancient sources say she was a local woman of blameless life, who donned a maiden's attire symbolically. She was selected not for noble birth but for personal integrity and an aptitude for the divine role. Once inaugurated, the Pythia served for life and was expected to remain chaste and devoted entirely to Apollo.

On each day of prophecy – which by Classical times occurred only on a single day each month for nine months of the year – the Pythia followed strict rites of purification. At dawn she bathed in the Castalian Spring, washing herself in the sacred waters that flowed near Apollo's temple. She then donned a wreath of laurel leaves (Apollo's sacred tree) and perhaps drank from a holy spring (the Cassotis) beneath the temple to prepare her spirit. Before entering the inner sanctum, the priests performed a preliminary sacrifice: typically a goat was sprinkled with cold water and observed for signs of Apollo's approval (if the goat shivered, it was auspicious). The goat or other small animal was then sacrificed on the altar, and only if the omens were favorable would the Pythia proceed to give oracles that day. (Since the oracle was open to petitioners

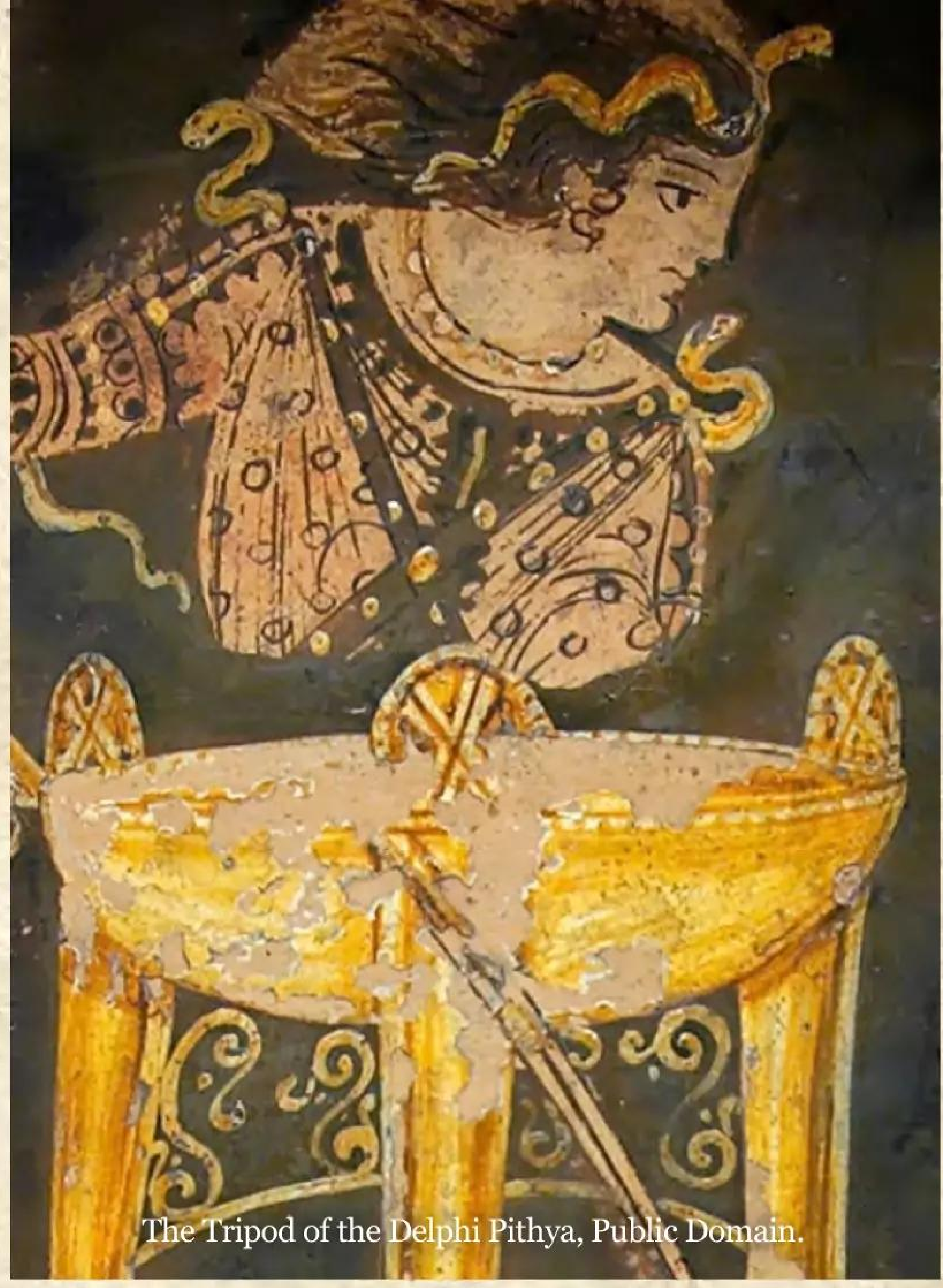
Godward, L'Oracle de Delphes, 1899. Public Domain.

just a few days per year, demand was high – wealthy supplicants sometimes paid extra fees, pelanoi, to skip the long queues.)

Within Apollo's columned temple was a restricted inner chamber called the adyton ("not to be entered"). Here the Pythia took her seat atop a bronze tripod placed over a fissure in the earth. In her hand she often held laurel leaves and a dish of water from the sacred spring. The air in the chamber was imbued with sacred stimuli: by some accounts, sweet-smelling vapors arose from a chasm in the bedrock, believed to be the divine pneuma (breath of Apollo). The Pythia would inhale this pneuma, and the room was said to be suffused with the scent of burning laurel and other incense, heightening the mystical atmosphere. According to the geographer Strabo (1st c. BCE), "over the mouth of the opening a high tripod is set. Mounting this, the Pythia inhales the pneuma and then speaks prophecies". The Pythia's mental state during these sessions was described as a form of ecstatic trance or possession: the god Apollo was thought to "take possession of her," using her voice to deliver revelations.

Oracular Practice: From Trance to Pronouncement

Once entranced, the Pythia would receive seekers one by one. Consultation days began in the morning with a public procession and offering, and only then could petitioners approach the temple in order of precedence. Great city-states or foreign kings sent official delegations (often bringing lavish gifts), who were given priority, while ordinary people waited their


The Tripod of the Delphi Pithya, Public Domain.

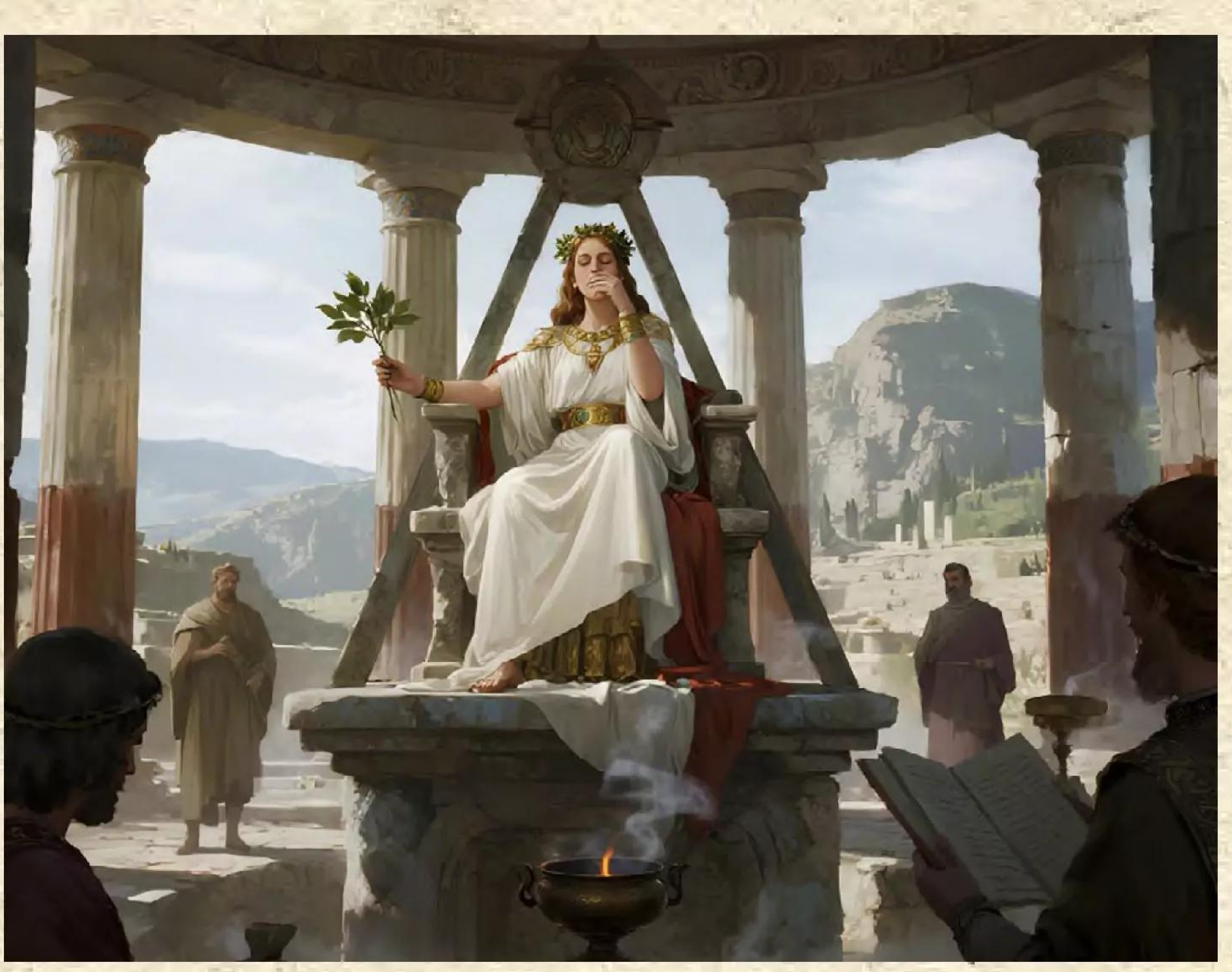
turn behind diplomats, generals, and poets. Upon entering the temple, the inquirer posed a specific question – often handed to the priests in writing or ritual form. Standing just outside the adyton, they would voice their question to Apollo's priest, who then relayed it to the seated Pythia within.

What happened next was the most mysterious aspect of the ritual. The ritual that preceded the prophecy was precise:

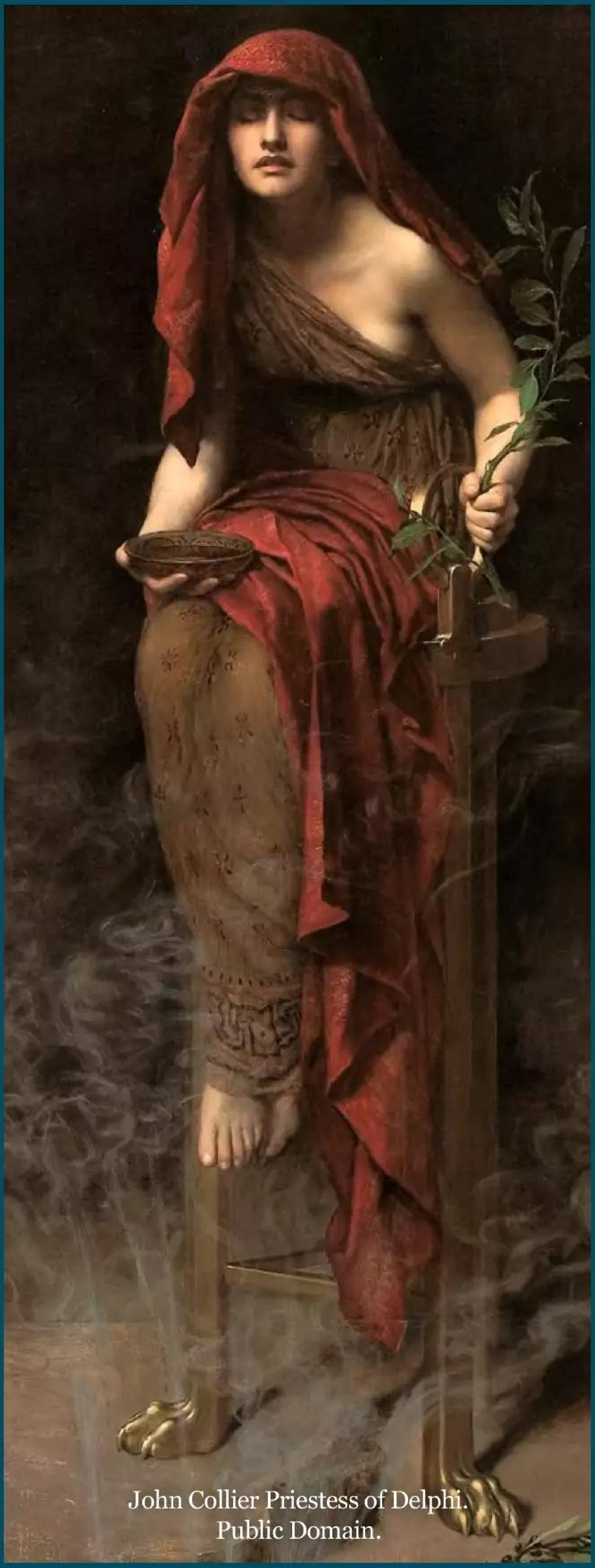
"The tripod of the pythoness or Pythia stood on a very deep crack in the rock. Poisonous gases emerged from that crack, quickly inducing the woman into a state of drunkenness and despair, accompanied by violent shivering. She would fall into a swoon, her hair disheveled and foam coming from her mouth. She also chewed laurel leaves, which helped her reach that state."

Ancient witnesses report that the Pythia would fall into an altered state of consciousness, speaking in utterances that ranged from coherent dictation to disjointed cries. Some traditions held that her prophecies came as verses spoken in Apollo's own voice, while others described incoherent ravings that attendants had to interpret. In practice, it seems temple priests (prophets) were on hand to shape or translate the Pythia's words for the petitioner. Strabo notes that if her answer emerged in prose, temple poets would versify it into hexameter – the traditional meter of Apollo – before it was delivered to the seeker. This gives the impression that a team of learned priests helped refine the divine message into elegant, albeit often cryptic, language. Indeed, many Delphic responses recorded in literature are in poetic form, suggesting editorial polishing by the sanctuary's officials.

The content of the oracles was famously enigmatic. "Apollo's prophecy, neither plain nor obscure" – as Herodotus quipped



The Ritual of the Pythia



John Collier Priestess of Delphi.
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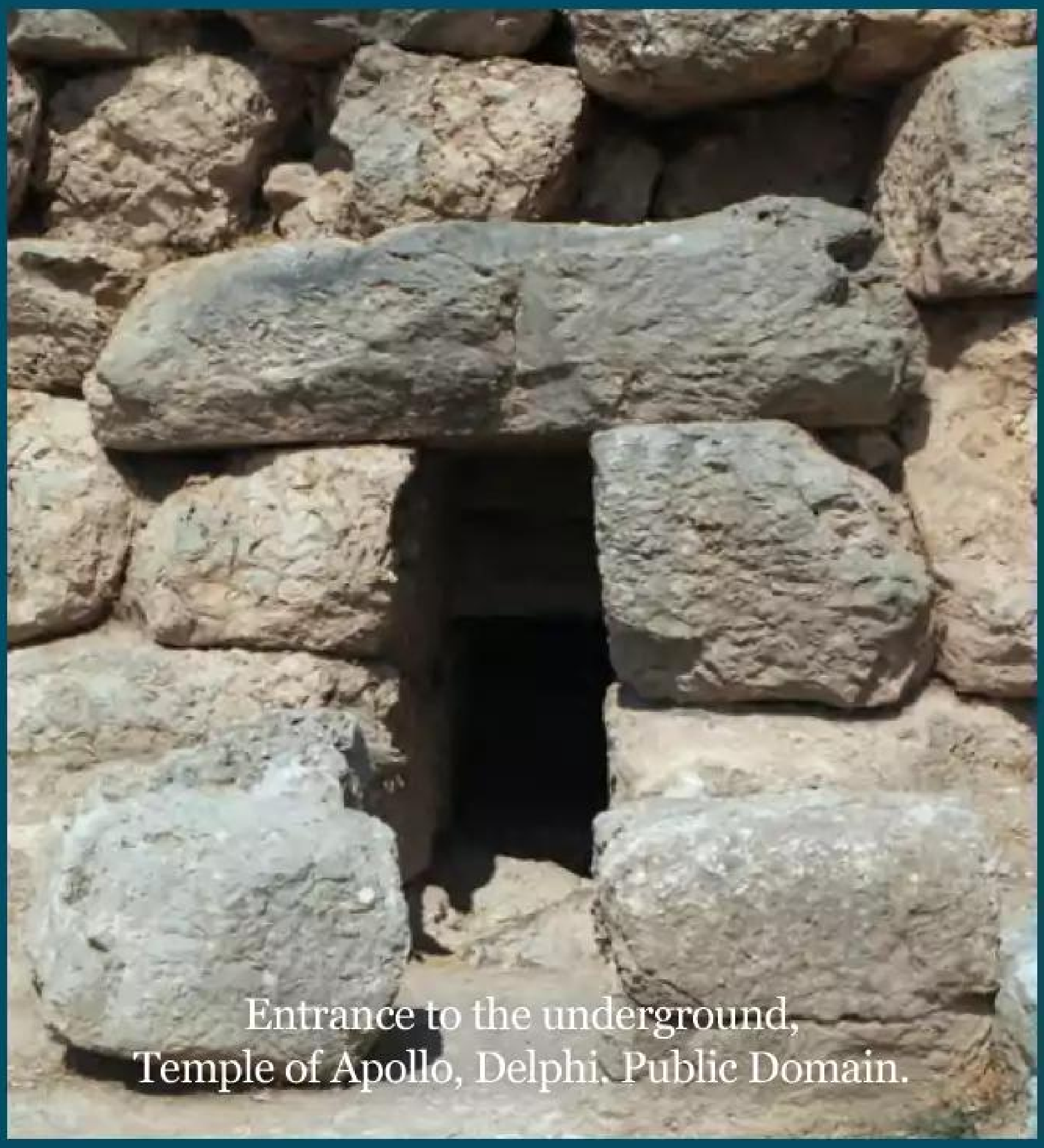


Entrance to the underground,
Temple of Apollo, Delphi. Public Domain.

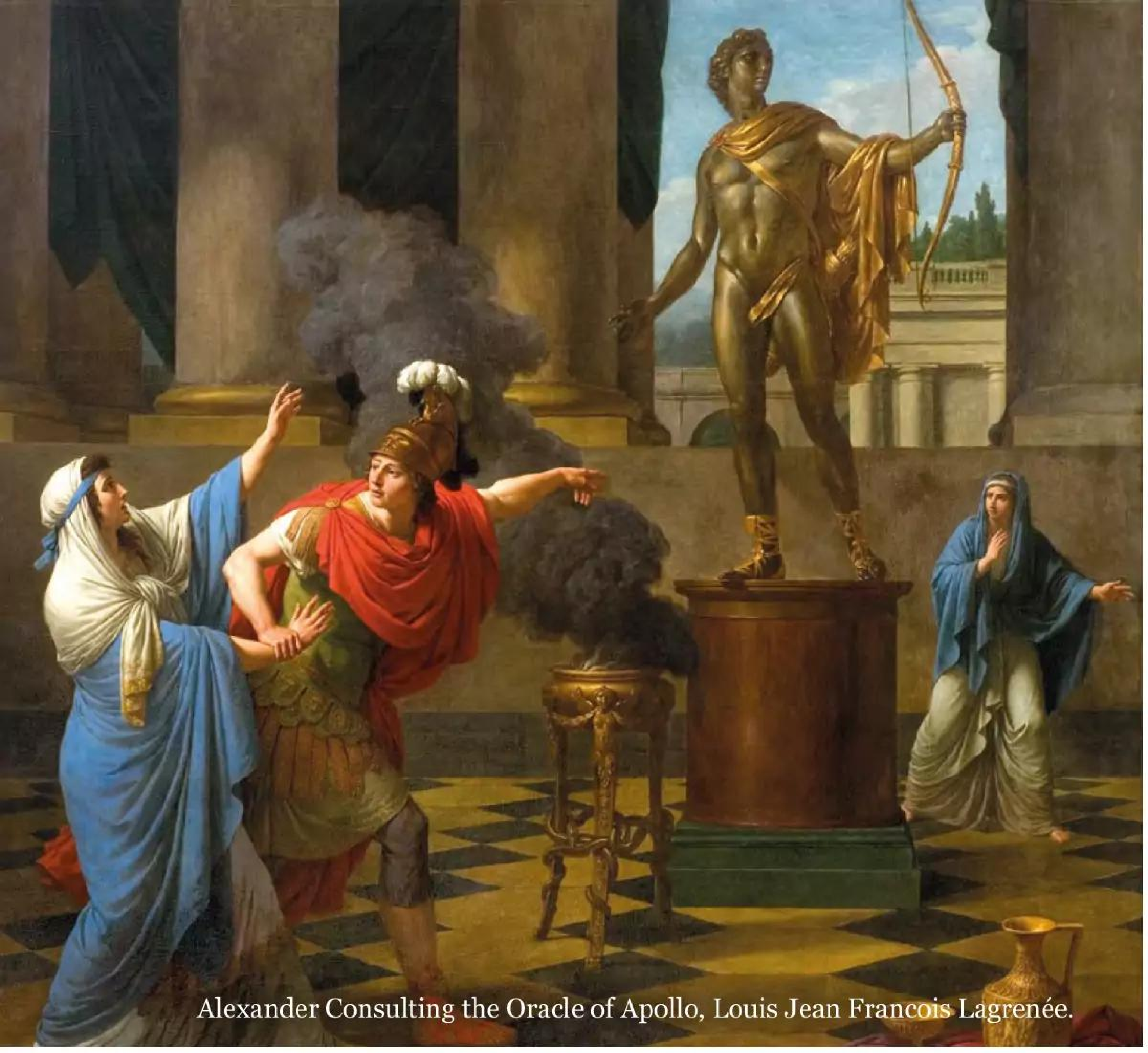
The priests who controlled the oracle belonged to the Delphic aristocracy. Among them, the five so-called Hosioi, who were truly responsible for the prophecies, were crucial. They came from five families who believed themselves to be descendants of the demigod Hercules and had the task of assisting the Pythia and interpreting the oracles.

Before each individual oracle, the consultant had to offer the pelanós, a cake made with flour obtained from wheat that was offered to the goddesses, and then pay a tax, the amount of which varied depending on whether it referred to the private or public sphere.

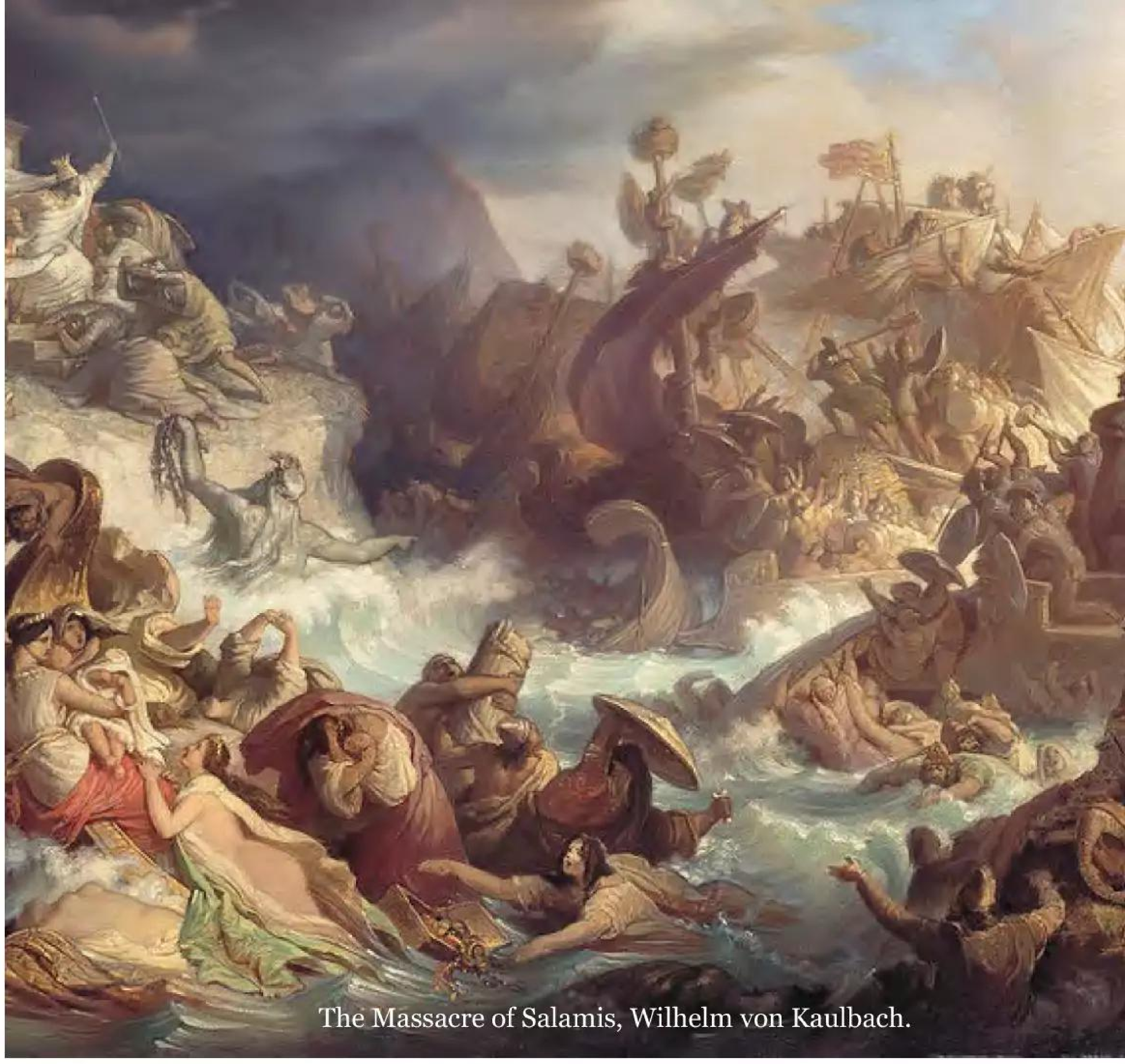
First of all, the Pythia bathed naked in the waters of the Castalian Spring, a sort of purification. Then something very specific and important happened that could affect the entire ritual, as it was necessary to establish whether or not that day was suitable for prophecy. A kid goat was brought in and sprinkled with cold water. If the kid remained indifferent, it was considered a bad omen, and the oracle was postponed. If, on the other hand, the animal reacted, it was killed and burnt on an altar outside the temple. The smoke was a sign that the day was favorable for oracular activity.

This was followed by a first bloody sacrifice called próthysis, which generally corresponded to a goat, and finally, the consultant had to place another part of another sacrificial victim on the sacred table. At this point, the consultation began. According to the texts, the Pythia entered the temple and burnt barley flour and laurel leaves on the altar of Hestia, the virgin goddess of eternal fire. She then descended into the adyton, the sacred room located under the temple floor where the omphalos, the sacred stone indicating the center of the world, was also located. There, sitting on a sacrificial cauldron called a lebes, closed with a lid and resting on a tripod, she held a freshly cut laurel branch in one hand and one of the woolen threads in which the omphalos was wrapped in the other. She was surrounded by a mysterious vapor called 'pneuma', which Plutarch describes as 'an aroma and vapor similar to the perfumes emanating from the most noble and precious essences.' This sweet vapor came from a crack in the ground that rose towards a vertical opening like that of a well.

The Pythia was then ready to pronounce the oracles, which the priest wrote down in Homeric hexameter. As Plutarch writes: 'Apollo reveals and opens his thoughts, but he reveals them by mixing with a mortal body and a human soul, which cannot remain calm and manifest everything in an impassive manner without change. Rather, it sways like a ship in a stormy sea and is carried away by its troubled inner self.'



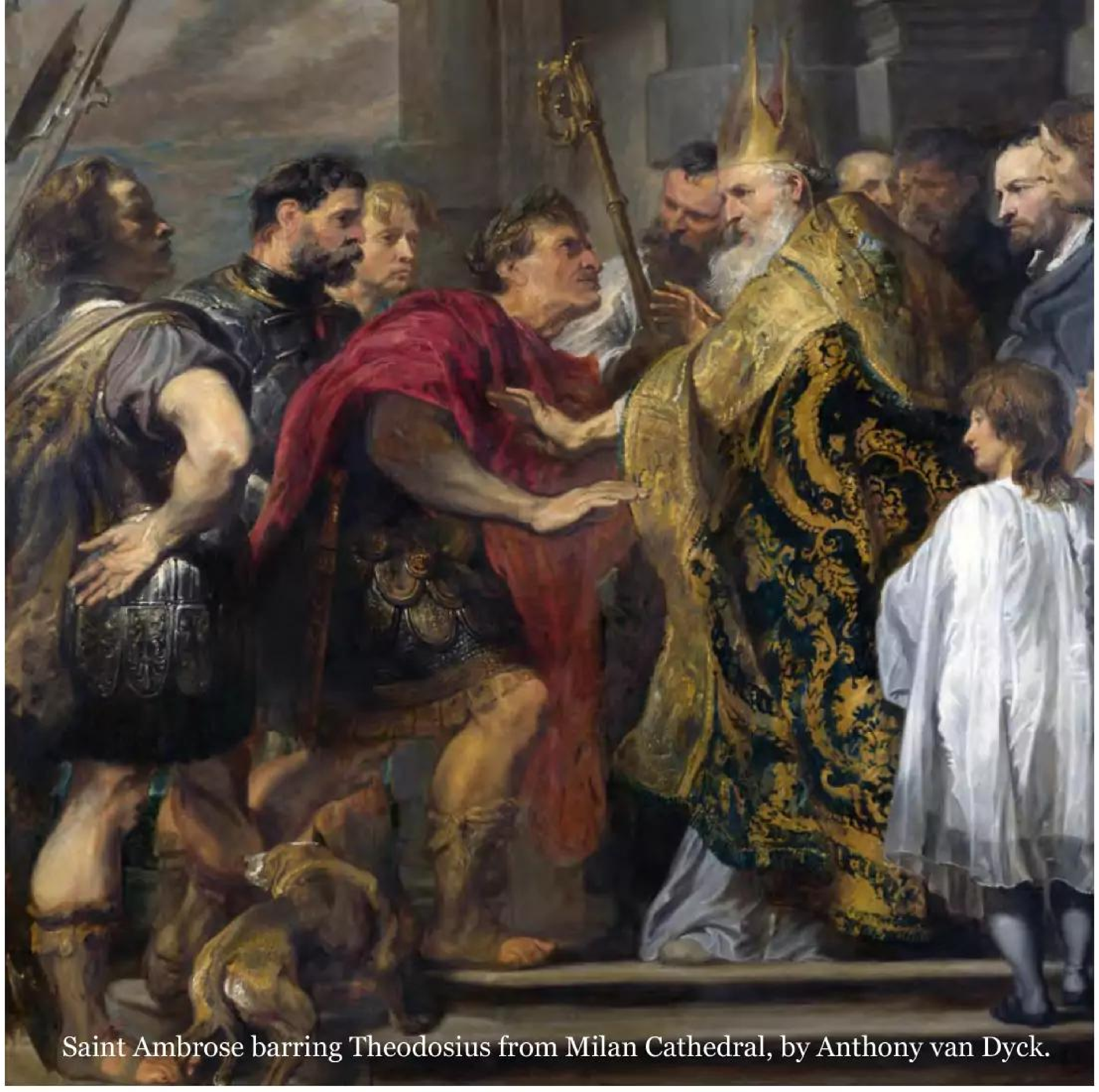
Alexander Consulting the Oracle of Apollo, Louis Jean Francois Lagrenée.



The Massacre of Salamis, Wilhelm von Kaulbach.

– often tested the interpretation skills of those who received it. A classic example is the prophecy given to King Croesus of Lydia in the 6th century BCE. Croesus asked whether he should wage war on Persia; the Pythia's reply was, "If you go to war against Persia, you will destroy a great empire." Croesus jubilantly took this as a green light, only to learn (after his crushing defeat) that the "great empire" destroyed was his own. Herodotus preserves Croesus's rueful admission that Apollo's words had been true, but misunderstood. Similarly, on the eve of the Persian invasion of Greece (480 BCE), the Athenians were told that "wooden walls" would defend them and that Salamis would witness the fall of their enemies. While some Athenians despaired (imagining wooden palisades around the Acropolis), general Themistocles astutely interpreted "wooden walls" to mean the fleet of wooden ships. His strategy led to victory at the Battle of Salamis, seemingly vindicating the oracle's ambiguous advice. In some cases, the Pythia's pronouncements were frighteningly direct – for example, when Sparta asked if they should attack Arcadia, the oracle responded by listing Arcadia's powerful warriors and ended with a warning: "in Arcadia thou shalt be fed on acorns", implying Sparta would gain nothing. But more often, prophecies lent themselves to multiple readings, allowing events to prove the god right regardless of outcome.
A proverbial Delphic riddle illustrates this duality: "You will go, you will return, you will not perish in war." Depending on where one mentally places a comma, it could also mean "You will go, you will not return, you will perish in war.". Such was the deliberately equivocal style that made the Delphic Oracle a source of both reverence and perplexity.

Despite (or because of) their ambiguity, Delphi's oracles carried enormous authority. Leaders who heeded the oracle's counsel were seen as pious and prudent, while those who ignored or scorned it did so at their peril. Legendary lawgivers like Lycurgus of Sparta were said to have obtained divine sanction for their reforms at Delphi, bolstering their legitimacy.



Saint Ambrose barring Theodosius from Milan Cathedral, by Anthony van Dyck.

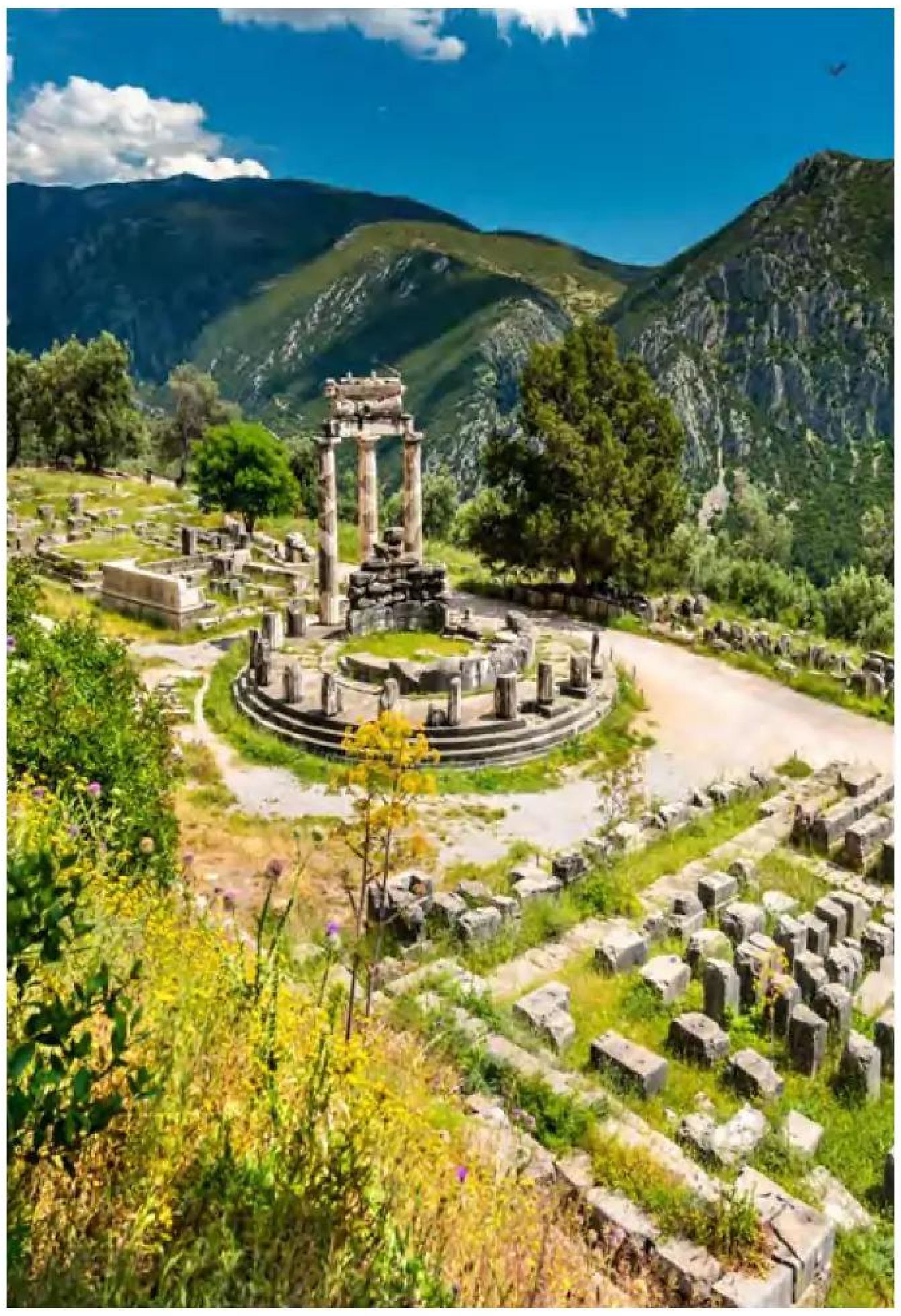
The oracle also played a key role in Greek colonization: towns as far-flung as Cyrene in North Africa and Byzantium on the Bosporus were established on Apollo's advice, spreading Hellenic culture abroad. Even foreign rulers consulted the Pythia; for instance, King Midas of Phrygia and Croesus of Lydia sent rich gifts and questions, reflecting Delphi's international stature. Perhaps the most famous personal consultation was that of Socrates. His friend Chaerephon asked the Delphic Oracle, "Is anyone wiser than Socrates?" The Pythia answered that no man was wiser, a response that baffled Socrates and spurred his lifelong quest to test and humble those reputed wise. Socrates interpreted the oracle as a paradoxical mission: to prove its truth by showing that he alone knew that he knew nothing, whereas others falsely believed themselves wise.

Delphi's influence extended into the era of Alexander the Great as well. In 336 BCE, on the eve of his Persian campaign, Alexander visited Delphi for a blessing. Arriving on an off-day when oracles were not given, the impatient young conqueror dragged the reluctant Pythia to the adyton until she cried out, "My son, you are invincible!" Seizing upon her exclamation, Alexander declared he needed no further prophecy. The Pythia's spontaneous words – "Thou art invincible" – became a self-fulfilling motto that Alexander carried into his conquests. Such episodes show that the oracle's power lay not only in her pronouncements but also in the belief and interpretation invested in them by supplicants.

Decline and Legacy of the Oracle

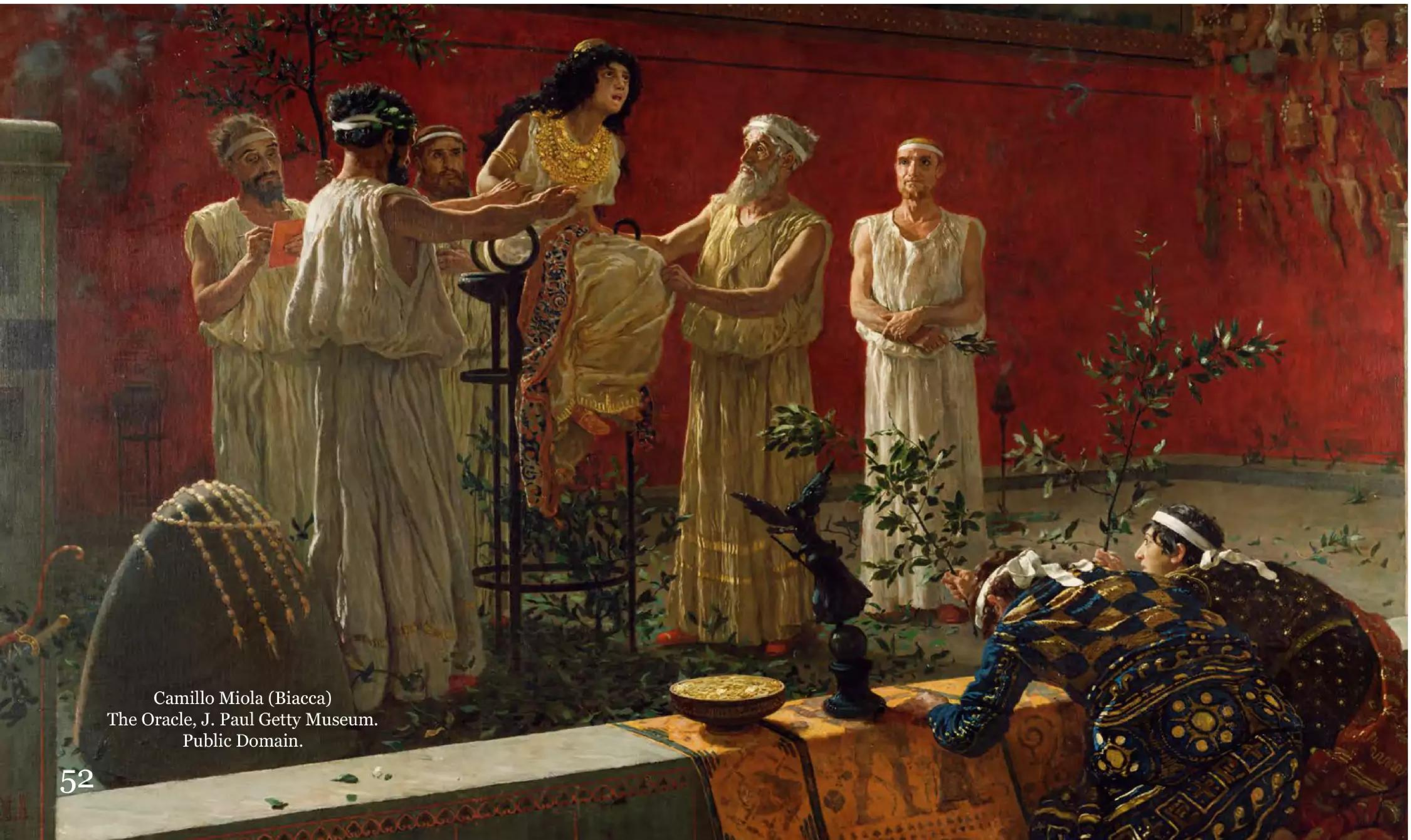
By the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the Delphic Oracle had weathered centuries of change. It was overseen by a council of Greek city-states (the Amphictyony) that kept it politically neutral and protected. Nevertheless, history took its toll. In 373 BCE a devastating earthquake collapsed parts of the sanctuary (perhaps interrupting the vapors' flow). During the Third Sacred War (356–346 BCE), Delphi was occupied and plundered by the Phocians, and later "liberated" by Philip of

Macedon – an intervention that increased Philip's influence over Greece. Under Roman rule, Delphi initially retained honor (Emperor Hadrian, for example, patronized it), but successive calamities struck: in 86 BCE, the Roman general Sulla sacked the treasuries of Delphi to fund his campaign. Not long after, Celtic raiders and later the Thracian Maedi tribe desecrated the site, allegedly extinguishing Apollo's eternal flame around 83 BCE. Though the sanctuary was partly restored, its old glory waned. Plutarch, who served as a Delphic priest in the 1st century CE, wrote that the pneuma (sacred vapor) was now weak and sporadic, causing the oracles to be less inspired and frequent. He noted that the shrine at times lacked a Pythia altogether, or had to employ multiple Pythias in rotation during busier periods to meet demand. The gradual spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire sealed Delphi's fate. In prohibitively the late 4th century, Emperor Theodosius I legally ended state support for pagan cults; Delphi's temple was definitively closed by decree, and its priestess no longer consulted. The last recorded oracle – as mentioned earlier – ruefully announced Apollo's departure: "Tell the emperor, the ornate hall has fallen to the ground. Phoebus [Apollo] has no shelter, no prophetic laurel; the fountains are now silent; the voice is stilled.". These poignant lines, preserved by later Christian historians, mark the end of Delphic prophecy after nearly a millennium. Yet the legacy of the Pythia lived on, intriguing scholars, poets, and scientists for centuries to come.



Science and the Pythia's Trance: Modern Insights

For ages, the secret of the Pythia's inspiration – her enthousiasmos or divine possession – was presumed lost to myth. Ancient observers like Plutarch credited a physical cause: he described a "sweet-smelling vapor" in the adyton that seemed to trigger the Pythia's trance. Strabo likewise spoke of a pneuma rising from a cavern that "inspires a divine state of possession" in the priestess. Such reports were long dismissed

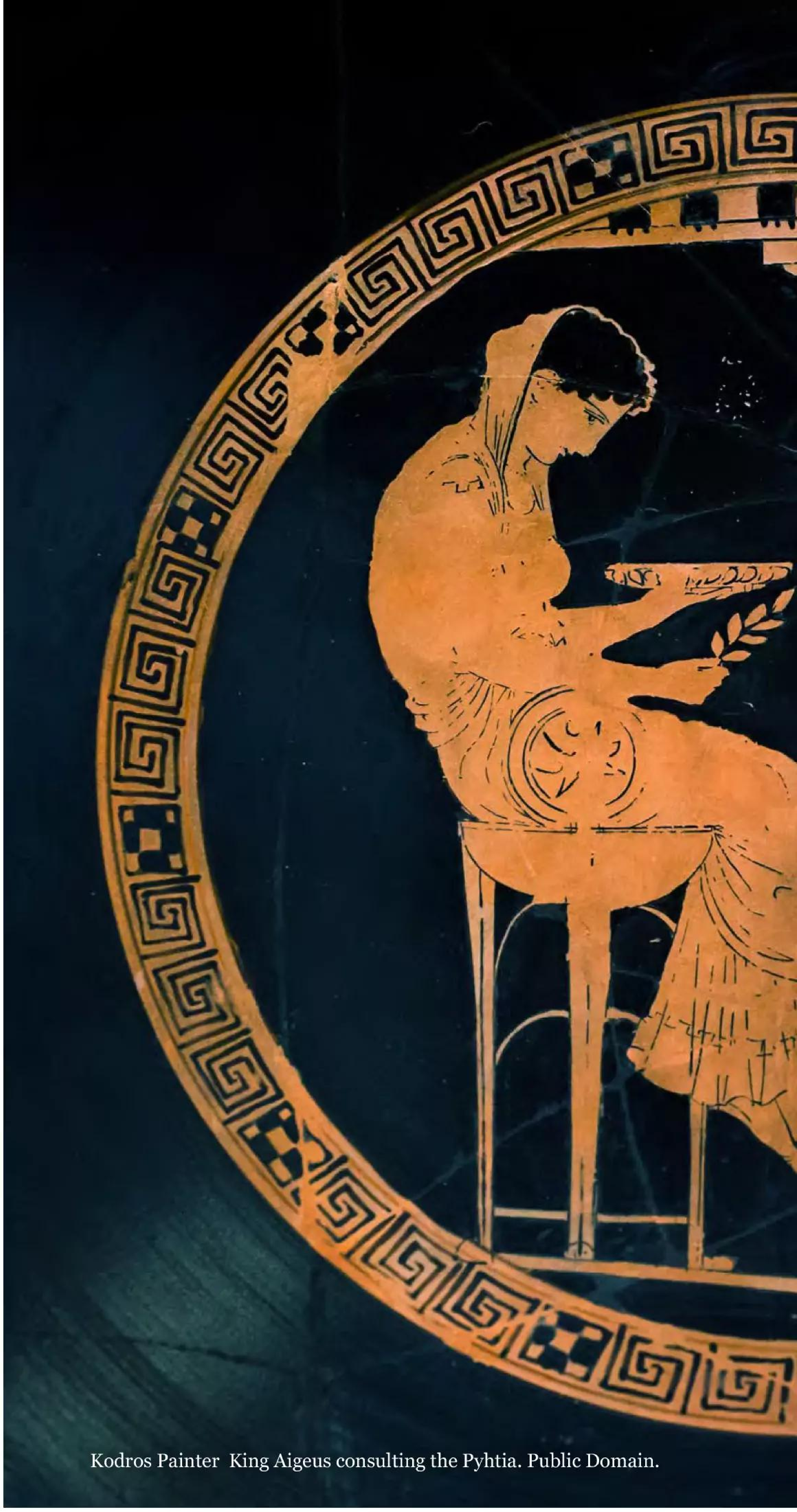


Camillo Miola (Biacca)
The Oracle, J. Paul Getty Museum.
Public Domain.

by modern scholars as folklore, especially after early 20th-century excavations at Delphi found no obvious chasm or volcanic vent. In 1927, the French archaeologist Pierre Amandry declared that no fissure existed and that the vapors were pure invention. This skeptical view prevailed for decades. However, in the early 2000s, an interdisciplinary team – a geologist (Jelle de Boer), an archaeologist (John Hale), and chemists revisited Delphi and made groundbreaking discoveries.

Beneath the Temple of Apollo they found that two geological fault lines intersect directly under the site, precisely as ancient tradition hinted. These faults, part of a complex tectonic zone, run east-west and north-south through Delphi's bedrock, creating fractures that could channel subterranean gases upward. Testing of spring water and soil in the vicinity revealed the presence of light hydrocarbons – notably methane, ethane, and traces of ethylene – seeping from the earth. Ethylene, in particular, drew attention because it has a sweet odor (like the "perfume-like" scent Plutarch noted) and is known to produce narcotic effects. The researchers found that ethylene was indeed one of the gases emerging from a spring (the Kerna spring) uphill from the temple, and likely would have been present in higher concentrations in antiquity when the spring flowed under the temple floor. Apollo's priest Plutarch had observed "sweet fragrances" filling the temple when the Pythia prophesied; modern science aligns with this, identifying ethylene as a gas that produces a sweet smell and induces a trance of euphoric disembodiment. In fact, analyses of ancient travertine deposits (carbonate minerals from the spring waters) at Delphi detected ethylene's chemical signature, confirming that intoxicating gases once percolated at the site.

Medical science provides intriguing parallels: Ethylene was used as an anesthetic in the early 20th century, and clinical reports from the 1920s noted that inhalation of low doses causes a sensation of floating euphoria and dreamy detachment. At higher doses, ethylene can induce agitation, delirium, uncontrollable movements and babbling – effects strikingly similar to the Pythia's described behavior in her most extreme trances. As one toxicologist noted, light ethylene exposure would put the priestess in a manageable trance, "like a runner after a race," leaving her relaxed once it passed. Stronger exposure, however, could produce the "frenzied delirium… wild movements of the limbs, harsh groaning and inarticulate cries" that Plutarch recounted in one disastrous oracle session – a session after which the Pythia collapsed and died days later. Modern experts Henry Spiller and others have pointed out that these two levels of symptoms – mild trance versus violent thrashing – correlate exactly with low vs. high doses of ethylene or similar hydrocarbons. It is a chilling confirmation that something at Delphi was capable of intoxicating the priestess. Whether the gas was primarily ethylene or a mix of methane and carbon dioxide causing oxygen deprivation (another hypothesis), the latest geological surveys do confirm active gas vents in the faults below Delphi. One recent study concludes that in Apollo's temple, an "indoor accumulation of gases" (perhaps CO_2 and methane) could have led to oxygen-poor air, inducing altered states in the Pythia. Additionally, aromatic hydrocarbons like benzene (also sweet-smelling) might have been present to augment the psychoactive effect. Notably, Delphi is not unique – many ancient oracle sites and sacred springs (from Dodona in Greece to Hierapolis in Asia Minor) sit on geological faults emitting fumes.



Kodros Painter King Aigeus consulting the Pyhtia. Public Domain.

The Greeks may not have understood the chemistry, but they keenly sensed a divine presence in places where Earth's breath wafted up from below.

Apart from gases, scholars have explored other contributors to the Pythia's trance. Some have suggested botanical substances played a role. The Pythia chewed laurel leaves, and laurel (bay leaf) does contain mild compounds that in large quantities could cause tingling or lightheadedness. However, a recent study (2023) on "Apolline divination: the case of the laurel" argues that bay laurel is not sufficiently hallucinogenic to account for the ecstatic state on its own, and posits that the laurel's primary function was symbolic – a ritual aid to focus the Pythia's mind and signal her spiritual status. Another speculation is that the Pythia could have inhaled smoke from burning oleander leaves (a toxic plant) in a brazier within the chamber. Oleander contains potent alkaloids that can cause symptoms akin to epilepsy or delirium if ingested, which some have likened to demonic possession. But direct evidence for oleander use at Delphi is lacking, and such a practice might have been deadly if mismanaged. The more accepted view is that geology was the pharmacology of the Delphic Oracle – in other words, Apollo's prophetess was enveloped by a naturally occurring "spirit of the earth". As Plutarch wisely noted, the vapors were likely a trigger for the Pythia's inspiration, not the sole cause. The priestess's own psychological and spiritual preparation, and the collective expectation of the ritual, would have primed her to enter trance and speak oracular truths. In Plutarch's analogy, Apollo was the musician and the Pythia the lyre: the gas might strike the first note, but it was her attuned soul that produced the prophecy. The Delphic Oracle stands at the intersection of history, religion, and science. For over a thousand years, a succession of Pythias – faceless to history yet profoundly influential – guided the course of nations from their seat above the sacred cleft. They were women who, in a rigidly male-dominated world, held immense authority as the voice of Apollo. Clad in laurel and lost in holy trance, the Pythia mediated between mortal questions and immortal answers. Her oracles could save cities or doom kings, all depending on how they were heeded. Today we understand that her "inspiration" may have been aided by ethylene and other hydrocarbon gases seeping from the Earth's crust – a remarkable case where modern geology and chemistry illuminate ancient religious experience. Yet the science does not diminish the Delphic Oracle's aura; rather, it adds a new layer of wonder. The priestess on her tripod, breathing in Earth's mysterious breath, embodied the union of natural forces and human consciousness in the pursuit of transcendent knowledge. The Delphic maxim carved into Apollo's temple was "Know Thyself." In retrospect, the Pythia's legacy invites us to know ourselves in both mythical and material terms: to recognize the natural phenomena that shaped our most sacred institutions, and to appreciate how belief, ritual, and environment combined to produce the prophetic "buzz" that, for centuries, guided the ancient world. ■

Laurel and Apollo's breath:

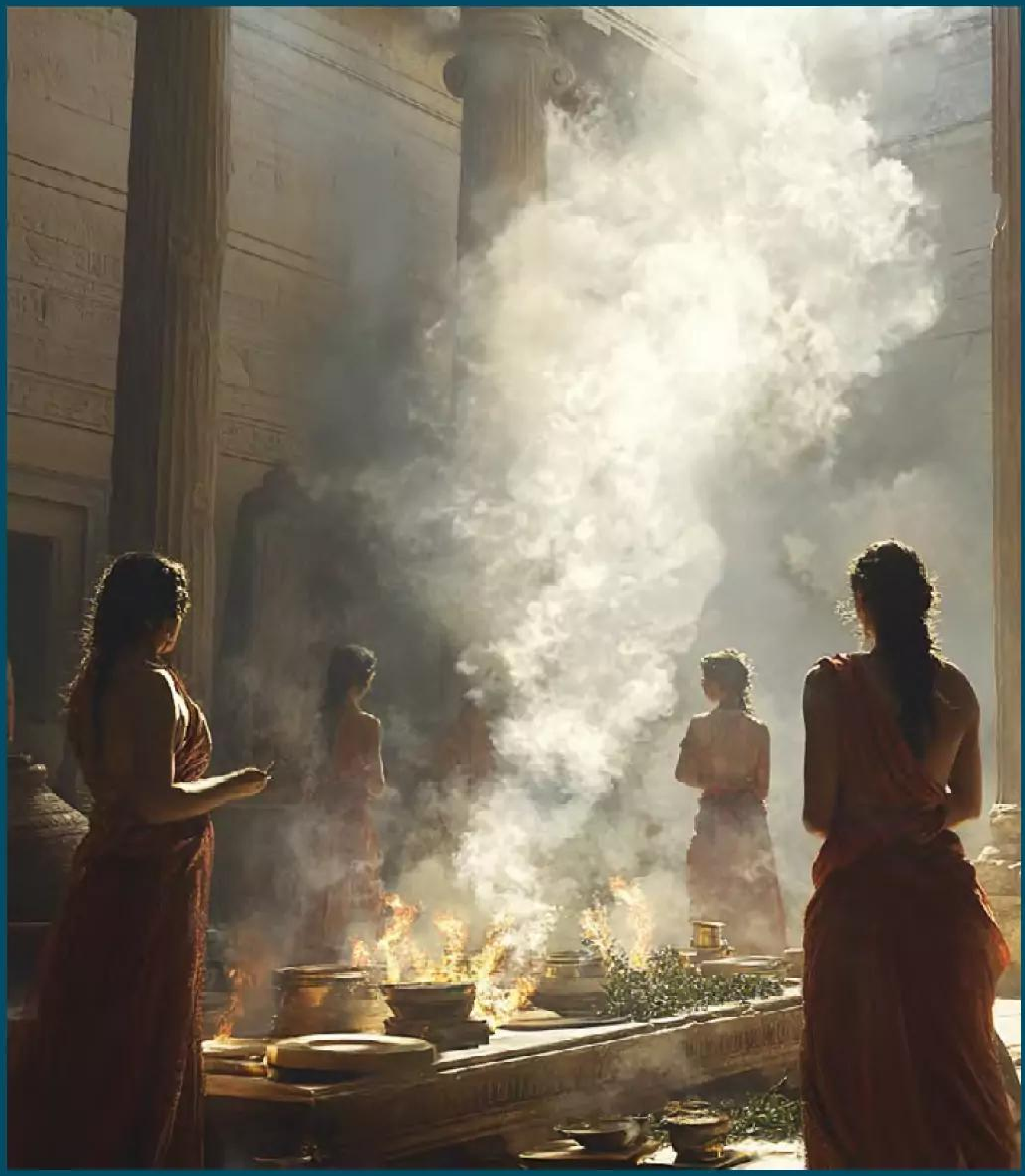
Rethinking the Botanical Trance of the Pythia at Delphi

In the ancient sanctuary of Delphi, it was believed that Apollo's voice echoed through the breath of a woman, the Pythia.

The divine will was communicated to men through ecstatic and often cryptic expressions. Classical sources describe a woman in ecstasy, with trembling limbs and wild eyes, clutching a branch of laurel, inhaling its aroma or even chewing its leaves before uttering her prophecy.

The Greeks had a word to describe this condition: enthousiasmos (ἐνθουσιασμός), literally "being possessed by a god".

But what exactly induced this altered state? And what role, if any, did laurel (daphnē) play in all this? While ancient sources elevate the ritual use of laurel to a sacred act of communion, modern science is shedding new light - and a little skepticism - on this long-held belief. Today, archaeobotany and toxicology suggest that the truth may be more complex.

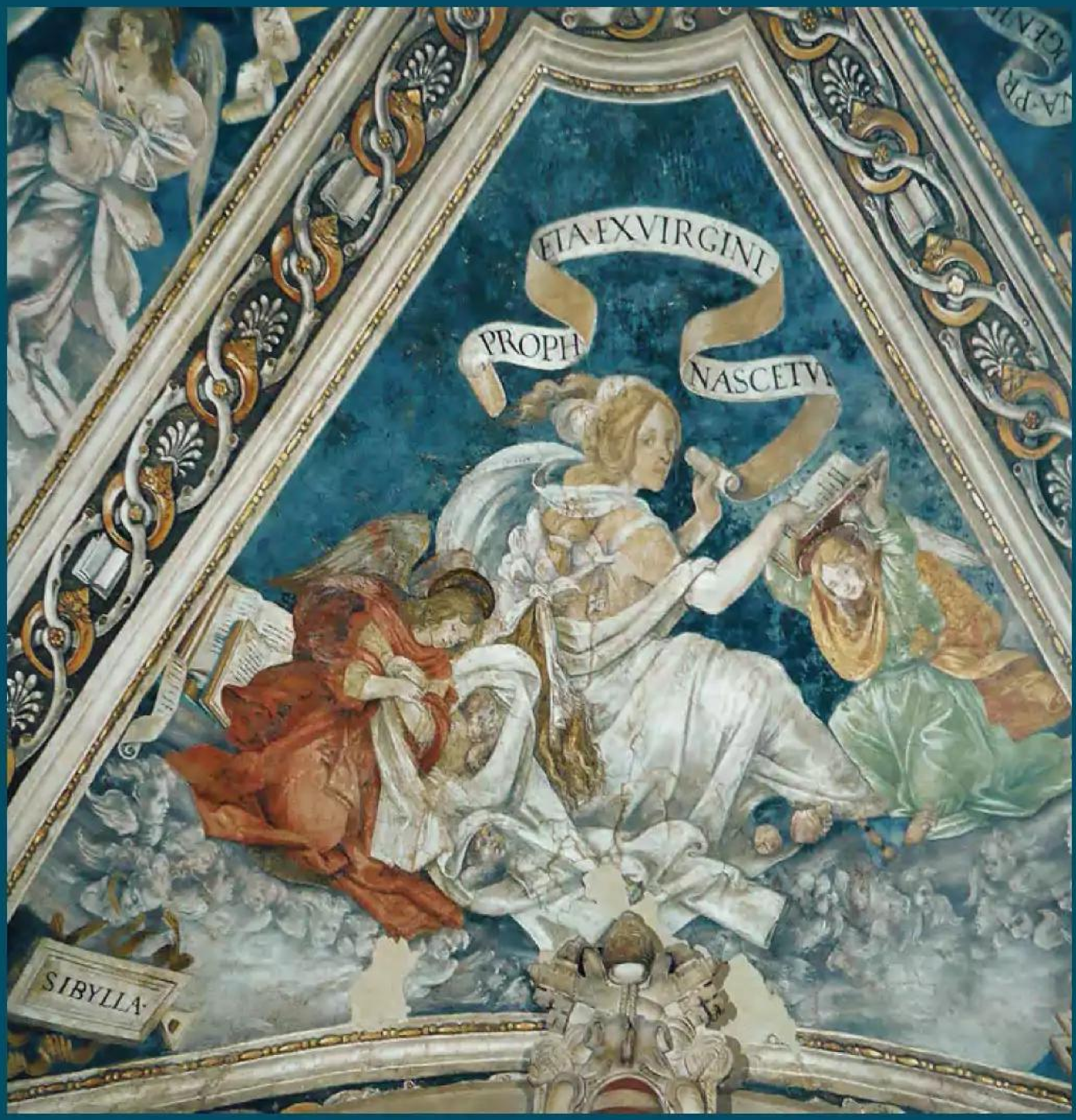


Laurel as a divine channel

In several classical texts, the Pythia is depicted holding or shaking a laurel branch during her oracular sessions. Lucian of Samosata, in the 2nd century CE, describes the prophetess entering a trance after inhaling the vapors and interacting with the laurel: "She chews the laurel leaves, sits on the tripod, and is filled with the god" (De Dea Syria, 36).

Plutarch, himself a priest at Delphi in the 1st century CE, refers to laurel as the sacred tree of Apollo, which features prominently in his accounts of the sanctuary's rites. In Moralia, he observes that "those who were inspired by the god wore laurel and waved it in their hands". Similarly, Euripides in Ion (lines 91-100) links the act of waving laurel with the onset of divine frenzy.

From these accounts, a ritual sequence emerges: the Pythia, sitting above the chasm known as the adyton, breathes in the air infused with aromatic smoke, chews or brandishes laurel, and speaks in tongues that the priests then interpret. Laurel, therefore, is both a symbol and an instrument, a botanical bridge to the divine.



The paradox of laurel: a toxicological enigma

From a botanical point of view, the laurel in question has traditionally been identified as Laurus nobilis, the laurel commonly used in Mediterranean cuisine. However, this presents a pharmacological enigma: laurel is not known to contain compounds capable of inducing hallucinations, trances or frenzied behavior. Its essential oils, mainly cineole and eugenol, are slightly aromatic and perhaps calming, but hardly capable of provoking excitement.

Toxicological studies confirm the absence of exciting properties: while the scent of laurel leaves may be ritually significant, its chemical composition is benign. As scholar John Riddle summarizes in Dioscorides on Pharmacy and Medicine, “there is no evidence in ancient or modern literature to support the psychotropic properties of Laurus nobilis”.

This scientific contradiction raises a new question: if laurel was not psychoactive, why was it central to the Pythia ritual? Was laurel merely symbolic, or did it refer to a completely different plant?

Rethinking “laurel”: a case for oleander?

In recent years, a provocative hypothesis has gained traction: that the ancient term daphnē, often translated as “laurel”, could include other plants, notably Nerium oleander. Native to the Mediterranean basin, oleander is a highly toxic plant whose ingestion or inhalation can affect the heart, nervous system and consciousness.

Some botanists and philologists argue that in certain poetic or ritual contexts, daphnē may not have referred exclusively to Laurus nobilis, but rather to a broader category of sacred or aromatic plants. Some scholars have therefore put forward the idea that the term “laurel” may reflect a non-specific term for plants associated with Apollo, including species not belonging to the Laurus genus used in ecstatic rituals.

Oleander, after all, although dangerously toxic, gives off a strong scent when burned and contains cardiac glycosides which, when inhaled in small doses, could affect heart rate and mental state. The ancient physician Galen, in his De Simplicium Medicamentorum, warns of the dangers of burning certain “sacred shrubs”, a warning that some have linked to oleander or related toxic flora.

However, this theory remains speculative. There is no direct evidence linking oleander to the Delphic ritual, and its extreme toxicity would make its use dangerous without precise control.

Sergey Novikov / AdobeStock

THE PLUTONION OF HIERAPOLIS

A Sacred "Gate to Hell" Shrouded in Death and Mystery

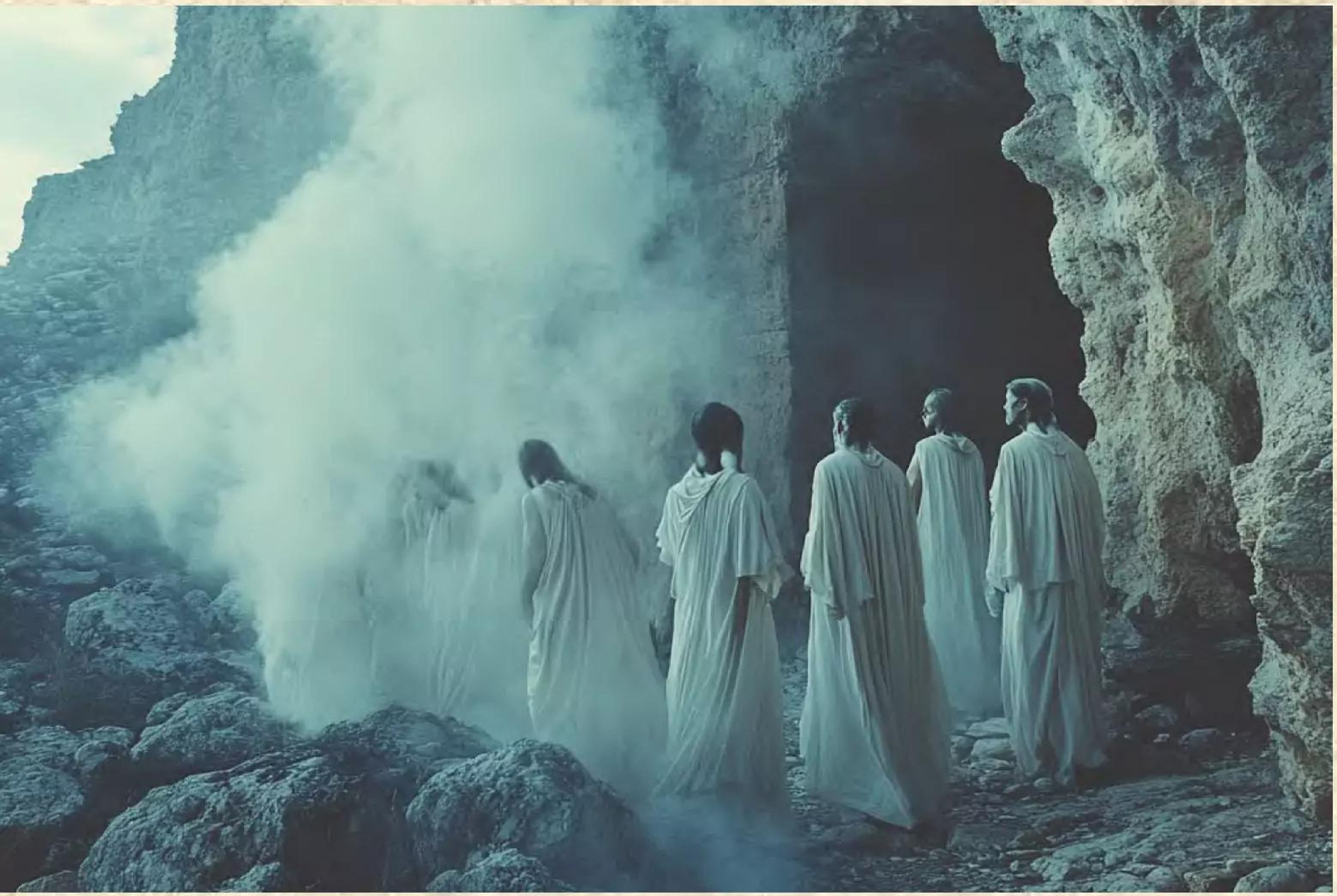
The Plutonion of Hierapolis in the Greco-Roman world provoked so much awe and trepidation that it literally translates to Pluto Gate, or a shrine to Pluto, which was the god of the underworld. Embedded in the ruins of the ancient city of Hierapolis (southwest Turkey, modern Pamukkale), this location was considered to be connected directly with the world of the dead. By the 1st century BCE Hierapolis was a renowned pilgrimage site, and travelers came to the pilgrimage site to be washed by the warm waters of the thermal springs and enlightened in the strange shrine of Pluto. Plutonion was a small cave under a temple precinct, and it was constantly pumping foul smells. Ancient sources report that ritually staged dramas were performed in this cave: healthy bulls brought into the mist would fall dead, and robed priests, especially the Galli, eunuch priests of the Mother Goddess Cybele, would come out of the "gate to hell" apparently unscathed. To an observer it was a baffling pageant. Was it the inviolableness of the priests visited by the divine power of Pluto and Cybele? Or fanciful nature taking advantage in the spiritual theatre? It had been buried in the ground and only unearthed by archaeologists and scientists 2,000 years later. The story behind it is as fascinating as it is illuminating, encompassing not only ancient religion, but also geology and the seeking of alternate states of experience by human beings.

Rituals at the Threshold of Hades

Plutonion in Hierapolis was used as the stage of conjuring the underworld and was the site of a temple. Constructed in the early Imperial age (the first century BCE to the first century CE) on top of a natural cave, the sanctuary was devoted to Hades (Pluto) and his lover Kore (Persephone). Greek inscriptions of the site support this dedication, one of them being - Ploutoni kai Kore. The accidental

appearance of the shrine was also no issue since it was constructed in an active geological fault line that released warm streams of thermal waters and volcanic gases, aspects that the ancients viewed as signs of divinity. In the writings of ancient authors, the cave of the Plutonion was only big enough that one man could enter and stairs led down into a darkness that gave off a misty and poisonous air. That unseen breeze of Hades was said to have been sent by Pluto himself making it sacred as well as dangerous.
We have rich descriptions of the rituals through classical works. In Hierapolis, a Greek geographer Strabo (c. 1st century BCE) was an eyewitness and published his description, which became famous: "*... a vapor so misty and dense that one can hardly see the ground ... now to occasion their fall, bulls are led into it, and are dragged out dead...*" Strabo writes in amazement that the priests would go into the leper grotto and come out alive, however, the priests were careful in their method; they preferred to hold their breath as long as they [could], and the priests demonstrate how they are respiring when inside the leper grotto. Cicero, the Roman orator, who travelled through Asia Minor in the 1st century BCE, also wrote, as follows:
"*All animals that pass within it, are knocked immediate death... When bulls are led into it they fall and have to be pulled out dead; and when I threw in sparrows, to see what they would do, they had no sooner fallen down than they died.*"
In contrast, human initiates were seen to endure the ordeal. Cicero marveled that "the Plutonium...is an opening of only moderate size, large enough to admit a man," yet deadly to every creature except those sacred attendants.

Pliny the Elder later summed it up succinctly: at "Hierapolis in Asia," a lethal vent kills all who enter, "harmless only to the priest of the Great Mother" (Cybele). These ancient reports highlight both the religious significance of the Plutonion and the seeds of curiosity about how its miracles worked.
Rituals of the Plutonion were focused on sacrifices and oracles. According to ancient sources and archaeology what surrounded the cave entrance was an enclosed arena (the Plutonion courtyard) with raised stone seats, a theatron, constructed so that crowds could witness the ceremonies. Priests would bring their offerings; namely, bulls, rams or birds to the cave. and just as the day was breaking (at which time the mystic fog was thickest), the sacrificial animals were taken into the gaping grotto, or even to the entrance alone; in a few seconds they had fallen to the ground, apparently at the blow of some invisible hand. The eunuchs, the Galli priests, on the contrary, used to enter the cave in a dramatic style, at least on their hands and knees and then again emerge, unaffected by the fatal breath of Pluto. To bolster the other worldly atmosphere, visitors were able to

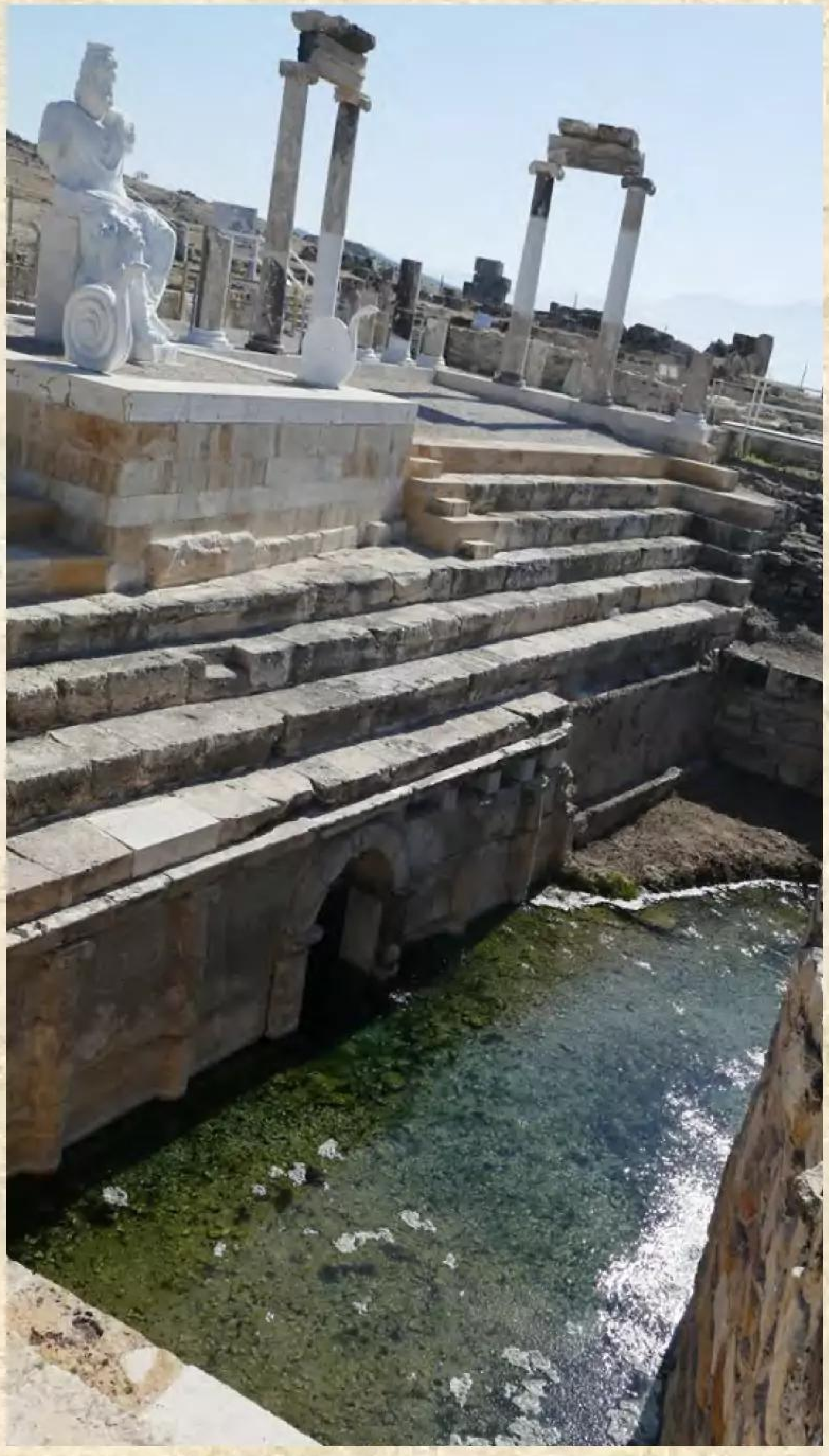


buy small birds or other creatures of temple attendants so that they can express the deadly power with their own hands and bodies, a trick-marketing that also proved lucrative to the shrine. According to ancient sources the Plutonion also acted as an oracle: petitioners could buy the right to have their questions submitted to the oracle of Pluto in hopes of a divine revelation. Other ceremonies must have been incubatory (the pilgrims slept by the side of the spot to obtain a vision in dreams), and of healing, as Hierapolis was celebrated for its spa-like hot springs. And in short, the Plutonion was a mixture of spectacle and spirituality: it was more an altar of sacrifice, more an oracle, more a shrine of healing, and altogether center of an intercourse of worlds in the ancient mind.

Discovering Pluto's Gate – Archaeology Confirms the Legend

During the several centuries after antiquity, the accurate positioning of Pluto Gate was lost, since the place was covered by travertine deposits and debris of the numerous earthquakes that troubled Hierapolis. Such cult sites were closed down by the early Christian authorities who had a mission of eradicating paganism also in the course of the 6th century CE. All that was left was tantalizing descriptions in classical literature.

The Plutonion only re-entered the light during modern archaeological excavations. Italian archaeologists started to explore Hierapolis in the 19th and 20th centuries: in 1965, one group marked a crack close to the Temple of Apollo as the potential Plutonion (later referred to as the Old Plutonion). There were indeed high levels of carbon dioxide and votive offerings to deities of the underworld in that cave but not a theater built as Cassius Dio himself referred to. The breakthrough itself occurred in 2013, when a team headed by Francesco D'Andria of the University of Salento discovered a another cave 200 meters to the east - the New Plutonium - that tallied with ancient reports of its character. The clues that had tipped D'Andria's squad to clear the area were the same that propelled ancient people thousands of years ago: dead birds on the ground, near a crack in the earth. Digging around it, they brought to light a little archway-and-semi-column-edged opening into a grotto with



the steps leading down into the ground. Right below the arched cave entrance they discovered a Greek inscription stating it to be dedicated to Pluto and Kore, and some remains of a giant statue of Hades and Cerberus, the three-headed dog of Hades. This statue is since replaced with a replica of the same at the spot where it stands today because the original rests in a museum now. At nearby caves archaeologists also found figures of the rest of the underworld, such as a coiled snake and Cerberus in marble, just where ancient texts said they guarded the gate to Hell. The excavation uncovered the contour of the open-air arena or theatron that surrounded the cave with stone benches where people could watch the terrible rituals. It was a breath-taking justification of historical sources: the gate to the underworld, which in myths was most dreadful, and now so very real.

The inside of the cave held physical records of its deadly characteristics as explored by D'Andria's team. There were the black walls, thickly coated with oxide of manganese deposits - a mineral deposit that sometimes forms in the presence of noxious fumes, which signified that the cave had long breathed noxious fumes. The chamber still carries a stream of hot water deep down beneath, like that described by Strabo, and flowing upward through a fissure of the rock overhanging the chamber, a warm mineralized water and gas.

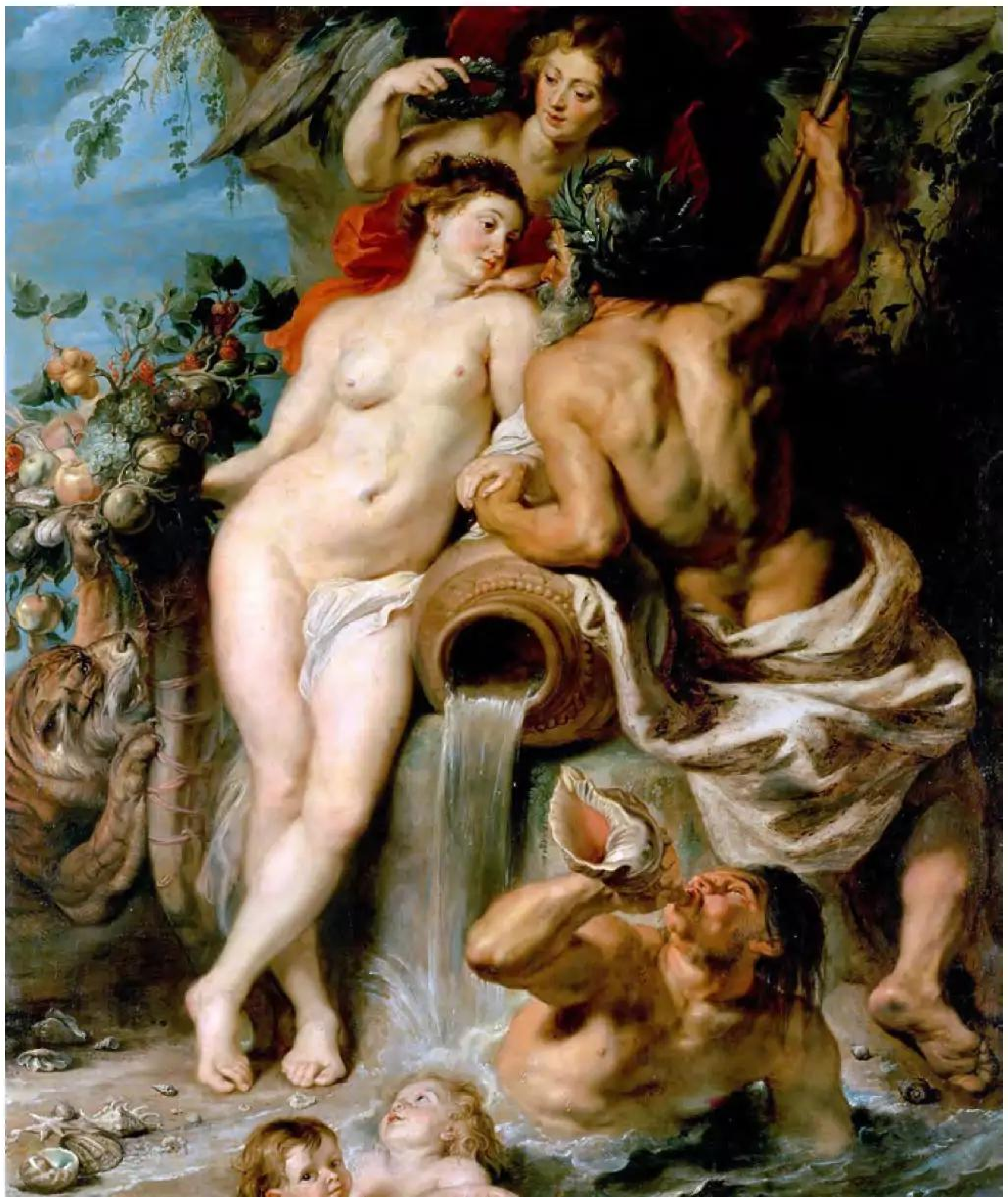
Excavators needed to be careful inside the chamber: the air by the cave floor was still lethal. Actually, as the excavation in 2013 went on, some birds were flying too close to the passage, only to fall dead to the ground, just as the stories of the old times had said. Instruments established that the cave still emits a powerful presence of carbon dioxide. To have excavated the architecture and the artifacts of the Plutonion, right down to the tomblike deathly pit, the dedicatory inscriptions, the archaeologists have not only located on the map where Plutonion was dreamed of, but they have also uncovered a picture of the interaction of the cult and the landscape at Hierapolis. The conclusions portray how the built landscape (temples, altars, theaters) was very carefully placed around the geological phenomenon to allow conducting of the mind-blowing rites mentioned in the literature.

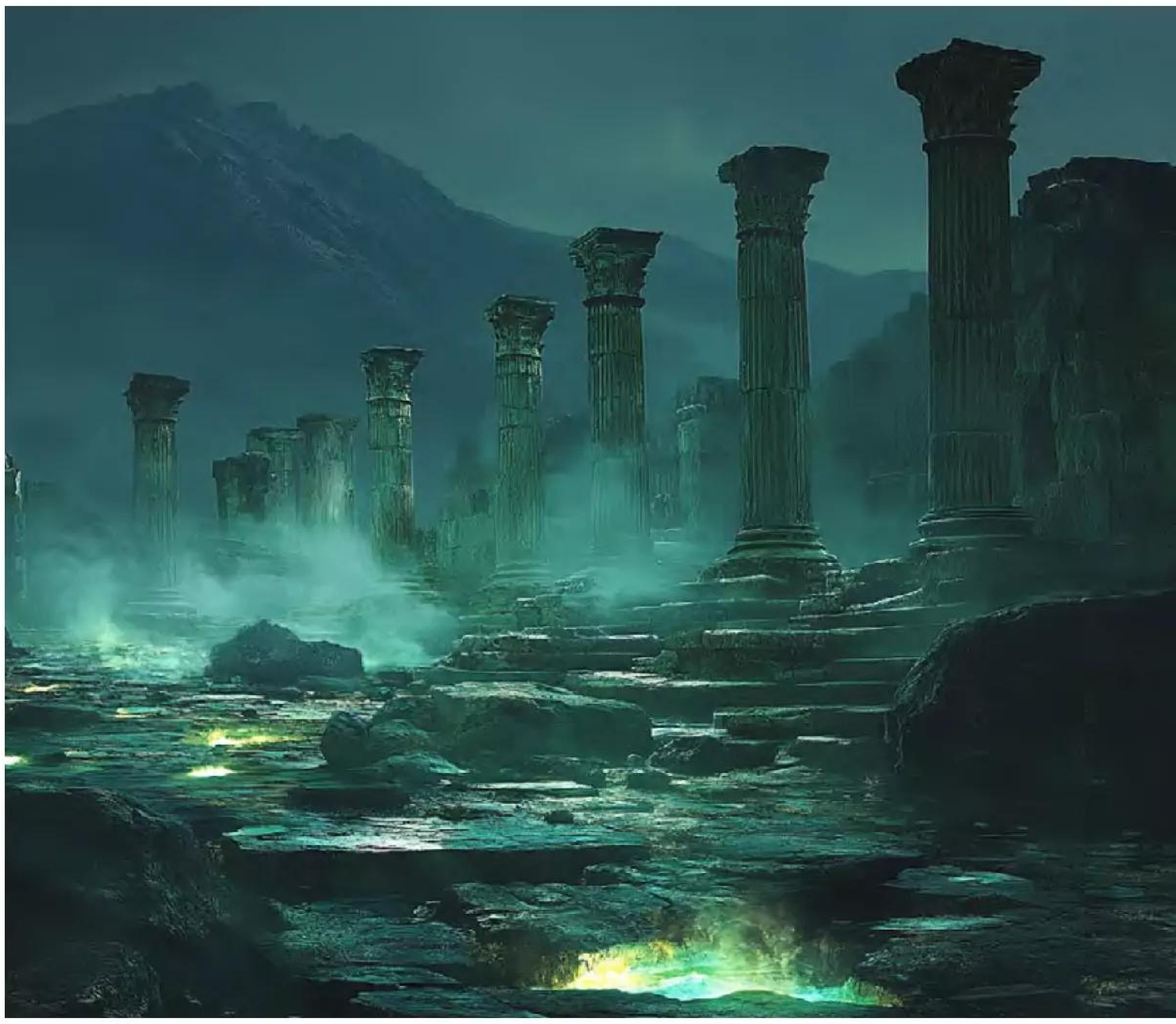
Deadly Gases and Divine Illusions:

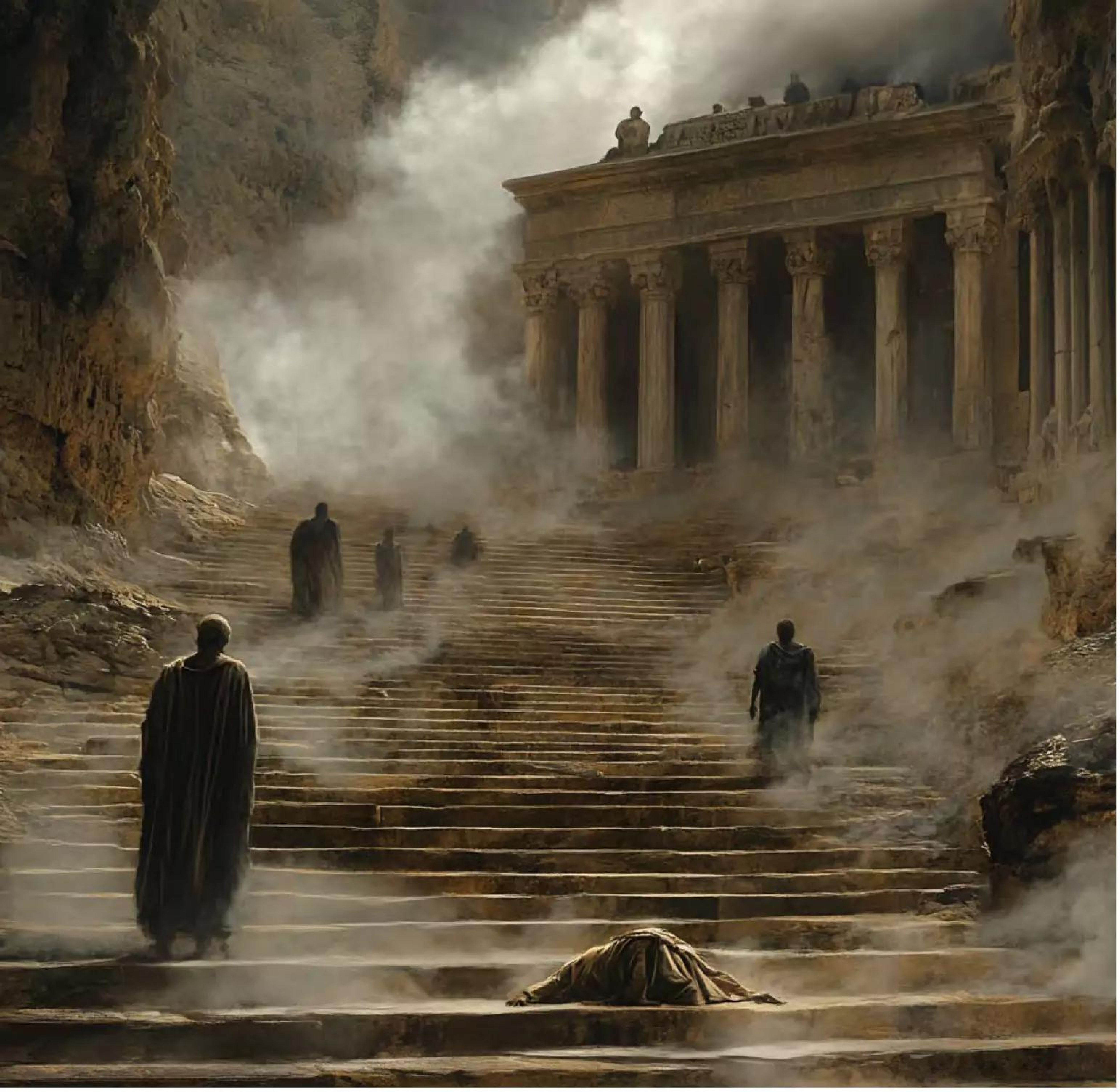
The Science Behind the Sacred Location

The forces which then people explained by gods and spirits, modern science relates to the geology and chemistry. Hierapolis is located in one of the most tectonically active areas of Asia Minor, where the fault lines meet, thus warming the groundwater and gassing out the deepest layers. The Plutonion streams have the smell of the breath of Pluto (produced mainly by carbon dioxide gas (CO2) which in large quantities can be fatal to animals and humans). Over the last few years, the volcanologists and toxicologists have been investigating the emissions of the site to estimate the extent to which the Plutonion killed its victims.

In 2018, portable analyzers were deployed by a team including Hardy Pfanz to measure CO2 levels in the cave and surrounding area. They have discovered that CO2 constantly drains through the cave and forms a non-observable lake of dense gas, which is gathered close to the surface. The concentration of the gas at ground level becomes incredibly high at night and shortly before the dawn, when the air is cool and unmoving, in some of the places exceeding 50% of CO2, which is more than sufficient to asphyxiate the majority of creatures within a few minutes. During the day the CO2 is scattered by the sun and the heat, leaving the killer film thinner. This circadian cycle fits the scheduling of the ancient rituals: in order to kill bulls or rams on the spot at the desired and rare occasions the sacrifice was performed at dawn, or in early morning when the reserve of CO2 molecules in the masses that resembled the lake became denser so that the animals trampled down to the ground were rapidly killed. The priests were made to stand erect, and probably on stone steps or platforms ready to obtain additional height, where they would breathe relatively clean air, as opposed to the deadly layer of the gas. Mouths and noses of the wretched animals were in the poisonous stratum, however, and insured violent rupture, like they had been stricken by some curse in the world below. The Galli priests had to take care despite this benefit. CO2 is denser than oxygen, however; it will blend upwards sufficiently such that an individual going too deep or lingering there would be overcome. The fact that the priests exhibited some signs of suffocating, as noted by Strabo, implies that they did experience effects of some sort, which could be dizziness or even asphyxiation, after a brief stay in the cave. The fact that, as Pliny writes, the deadly exhalation is, to the priest of the Great Mother, harmless, possibly alludes to the idea that those priests were viewed as being supernaturally invulnerable. As a matter of fact, even their immunity was a manufactured facade: ancient authors such as







Strabo already had the intuition that everything was about keeping one breath and where to turn or bend. This is confirmed by modern researchers. They had long known of the poison gas effect of the fatal breath of [the mythical hellhound] Cerberos, and could tell that there was a certain maximum height (which Pfanz jested was actually attained by the eunuch priests) at which it would do any harm, and in some cases they perhaps stooped or even crawled to an air pocket in order to gain relief. The staff of the temple could safely simulate their “journey to Hades” with the help of breath control techniques, and the topography of the cave they were performing in, and maintain the idea of divine protection. And to an unconscious observer in the stone theatron, the death of a bull before a priest comes out smiling would have been irresistible evidence of the goodwill of Pluto.

Humorously you might think that the lethal gas of the Plutonion could have given some minor hallucinations or some mental changes in some cases. Although high doses of CO2 will simply asphyxiate, low concentrations may give a feeling of euphoria, dizziness and lack of coordination because of hypoxia (lack of oxygen). It is possible to conceive that the inmates or initiates who pressed close to the edge of the gas lake, almost surely to consult the oracles, felt a half-dizzy, trance-like condition as they breathed a little of the diffusing smoke. Others might dream that the ancient temple ritual could indeed have meant that the attendants had willingly inhaled a minute dose of the so-called sacred gas to look tranced or inspired by the divinities.

The ecstatic nature of the Galli priests who officiated in the worship of Cybele may already have been used to different states of consciousness (by frenetic dancing, music, or even by use of herbal mixtures).

Even at Hierapolis itself the intoxicating geology was utilized: the breath of the earth was the element of encounter of the divine, or of the impersonation of its brethern sworn at least.

Pliny expressly associates with “prophetic caverns…drunk with the fumes of which [men] prophesy, as in that utterly illustrious oracle of our own at Delphi.” The well-known trance state by the Delphic priestess (Pythia) was probably achieved by breathing gases of light hydrocarbons in an enclosed space.

At the Oracle of Trophonius in Greece, supplicants made a journey into an underground chamber until emerging into a fearful, comatose condition; so powerful was the experience that the phrase to have gone to Trophonius was used mockingly, to indicate looking shaken. The similarity here indicates a comprehensive trend in the ancient world, that areas which were released by the earth with unusual vapors or energies were usually saturated with chthonic power. Whether this result was fatal (as at Hierapolis and on the Lake Avernus in Italy, called the Birdless Lake because of the fatal fumes) or psychedelic (as in the cases of Delphi and perhaps of Trophonius) the ancients did not need to be told that geology was linked with the divine. They built temples and crafted rituals to choreograph human encounters with these natural wonders, thereby inducing states of fear, reverence, or insight that we might today call altered states of consciousness.

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Staring down the side of the walled grotto of the Gate of Pluto in the modern tourist moment one may enjoy the objective science and the primordial magic of this site as well. By the 21st century, we realize that what makes up the deadly lake in the cave is not another god of the underworld that is angry, but rather we have invisible CO2 gas. But when one looks into this opening in the dark one can readily imagine why the ancient Hierapolis had a proper horror of it.

The Plutonion is a reminder that geographical landscapes have the capacity to inform the cultural understanding. It makes us remember that there can be just a perceptional difference between a natural hazard and a sacred experience; a difference in context. Finally, the Plutonion of Hierapolis can be seen as having both a scientific and a human perspective in the way it exists: a remembrance that nature can indeed cause man to be in awe, as well as a reminder to the ingenuity of man to turn that awe into religions and rituals, and the attempt to access transcendence. ■

THE ELEUSINIAN

Ancient Rites and the

BY MASSIMO BONASORTE

MISTERY

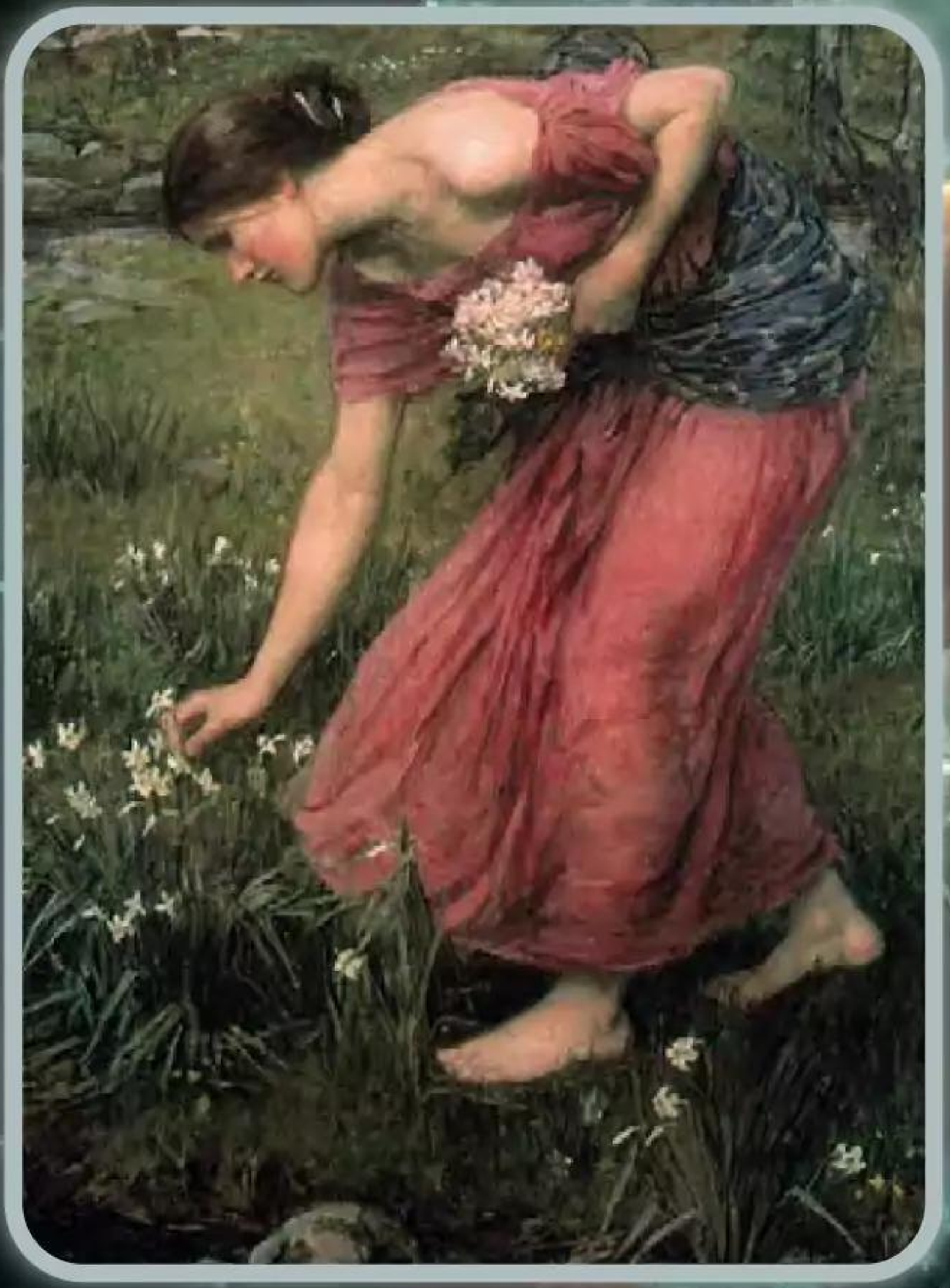
Secret of the Kykeon

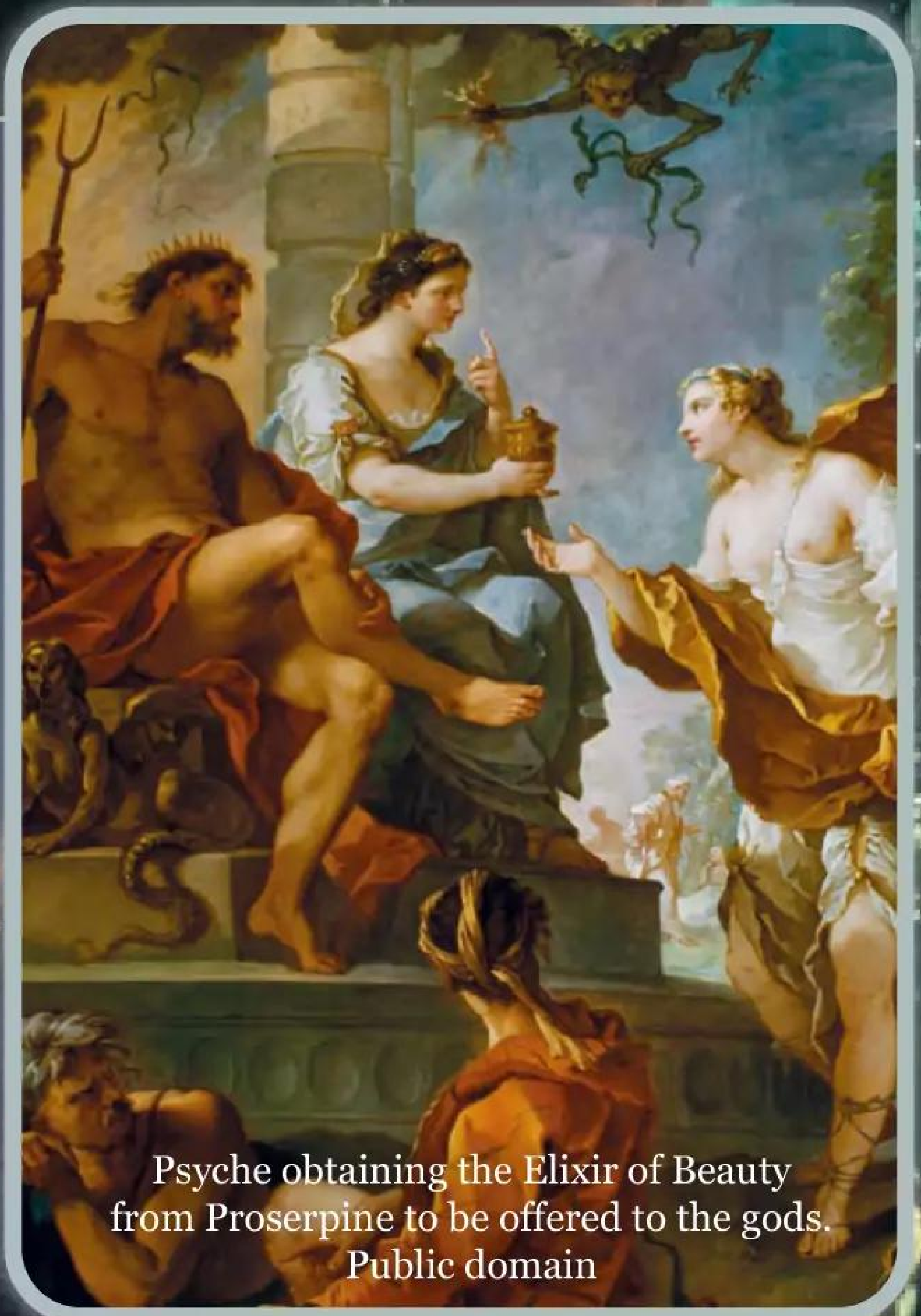
One moonless autumn night in ancient Greece, a silent procession winds its way down the Sacred Road from Athens to Eleusis. The air is thick with dust and anticipation as hundreds of initiates – rich and poor, men and women, even enslaved people – follow flickering torches toward a walled sanctuary by the sea. They have fasted, bathed in the sea at dawn, and sacrificed a piglet in purification. Now, under the glimmer of stars, they enter the Telesterion, a great hall capable of holding thousands. Within those stone walls, lit by the orange glow of oil lamps, they will partake in a secret ritual that, according to those who undergo it, changes life forever. The initiates have waited years for this moment. Some are trembling with fear, others with hope. All carry in their mind a promise whispered through generations: whoever witnesses the Mysteries of Eleusis will no longer fear death.

A Journey of Initiation

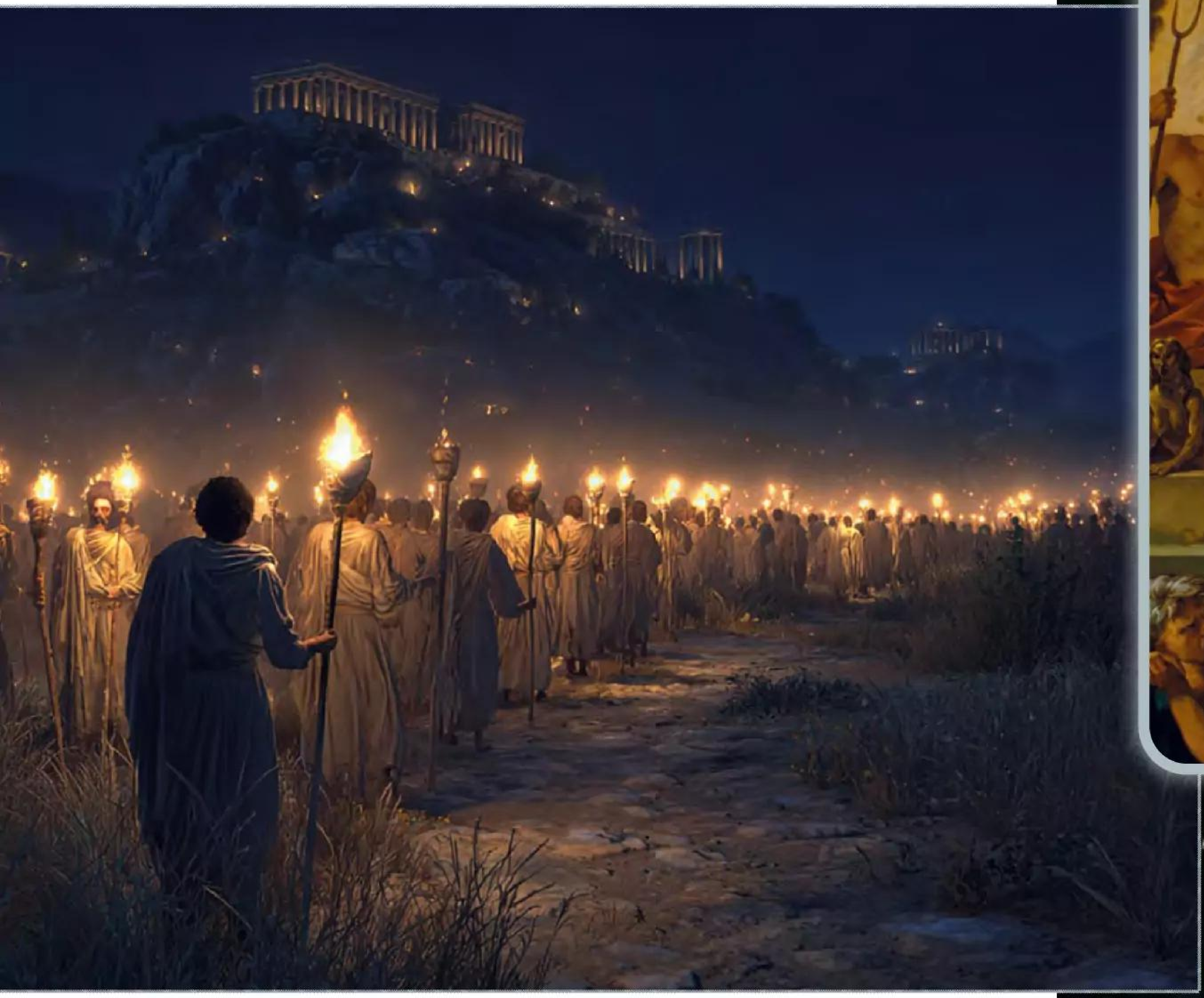
The Eleusinian Mysteries were the most well-known unknown religious ceremony of the ancient world, which was honored for almost two millennia. Generation after generation, year after year, people went to Eleusis the provincial town just west of Athens to be initiated into the cult of grain-goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. The myth of the Mysteries was like a story of death and renewal, Persephone, the spring goddess was snatched by Hades to the land of the dead, and the world was in winter until the goddess and her mother were once again united.

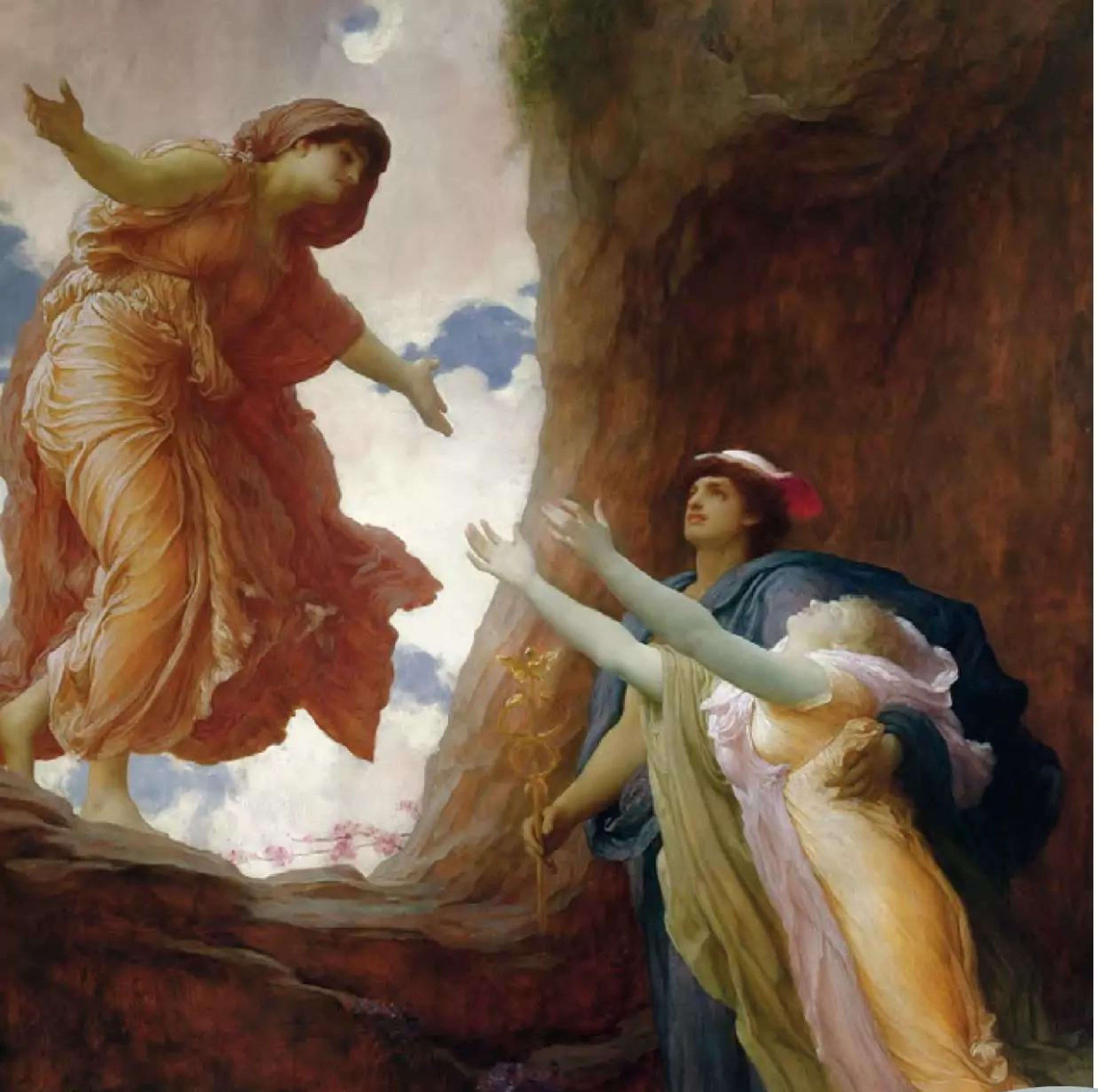
In memory of Demeter who brought agriculture and of Persephone who had come back up to the surface, the Mysteries offered to the initiates a vital spiritual regeneration. Athens, as the Roman speaker Cicero observed in admiration, had presented to the world, no gifts so fair, as these holy institutions by which man had been civilized, and by which he had been enabled to live with more pleasure, and to die with a better prospect. Early poets and thinkers also wrote about the Mysteries reverently, but obliquely. The dramatic writer Sophocles hinted those who participated were thrice blessed and would dwell blissfully in Hades and those who were un-initiated would dwell in darkness and misery.





Psyche obtaining the Elixir of Beauty from Proserpine to be offered to the gods. Public domain





Frederic Leighton,
The Return of Persephone.
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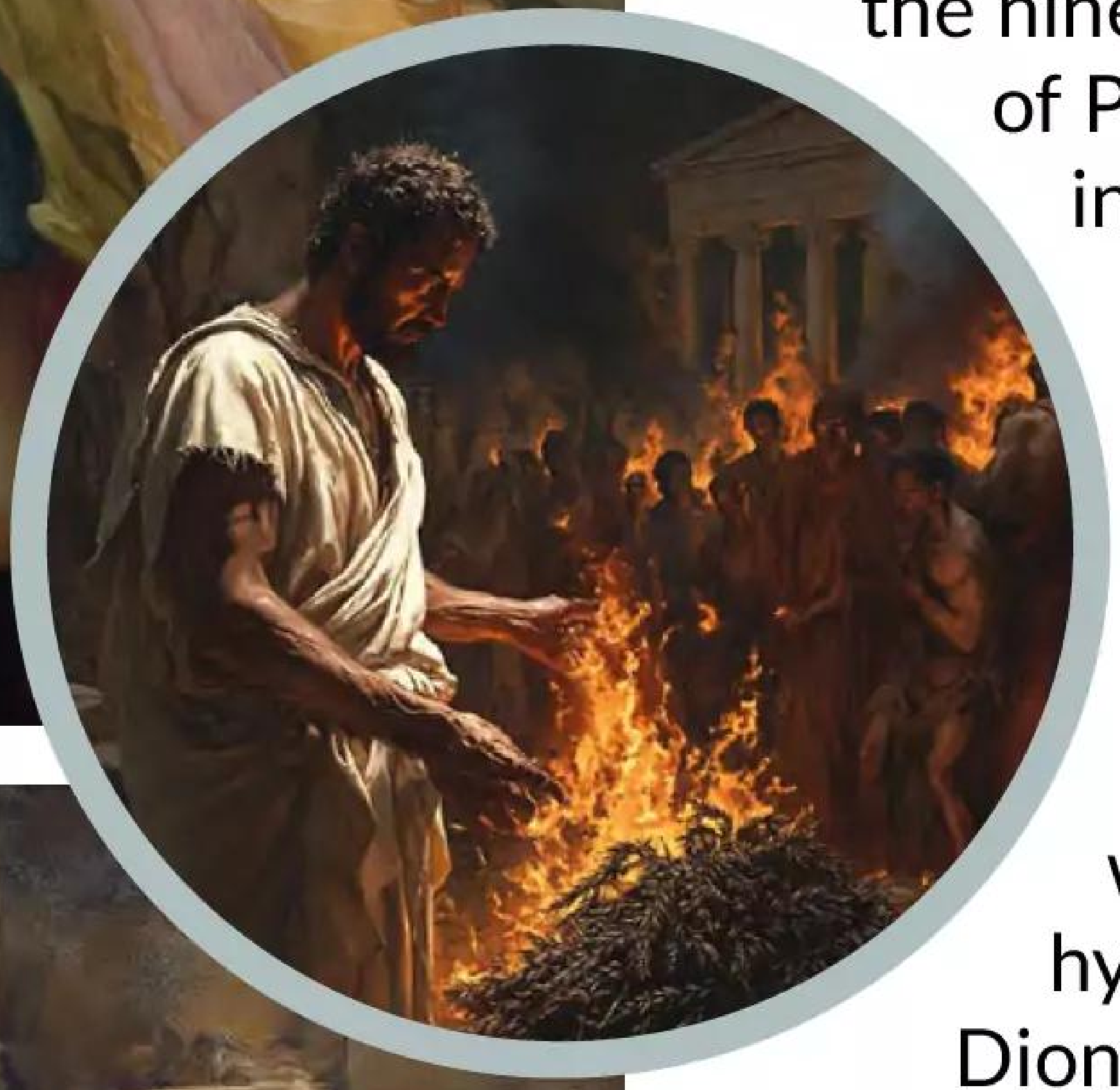


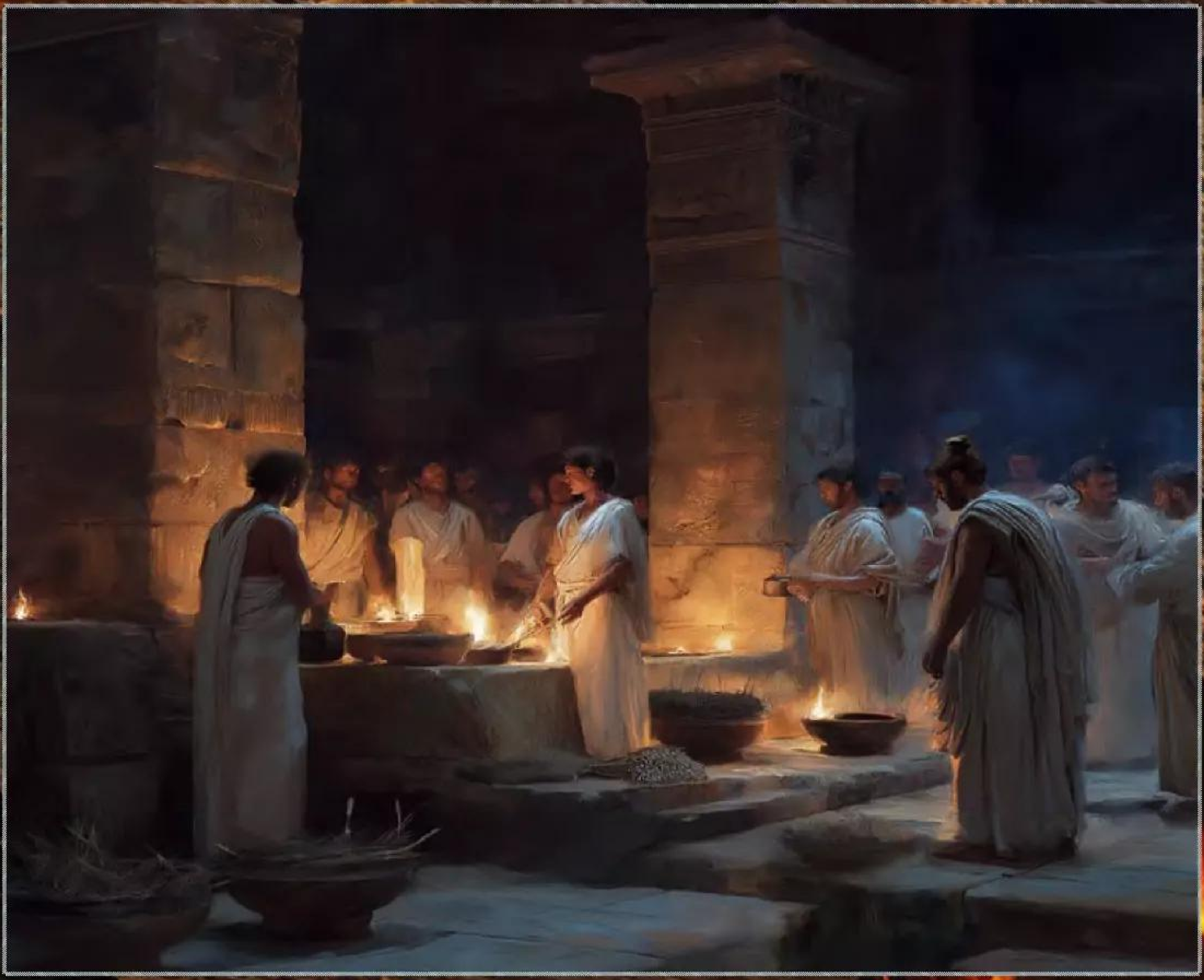
These kinds of witnesses gave an aura of awe around Eleusis. By the classical age, membership was open to nearly anybody who could speak (Attic) Greek and had no major brand of blood guilt. Women, and men, citizens of Athens and foreigners, even slaves; all could kneel as mystai (initiates) in front of the altar of Demeter. With time the stature of Eleusis could only increase: statesmen, philosophers such as Plato, and Roman emperors (Augustus to Marcus Aurelius) went through the initiation, and followed the track of ordinary farmers in their search to transcend themselves. When there was no sacred text in a time, the Mysteries offered a personal, direct contact with deities that cut not only across social lines but also through the gender barrier.

The Greater Mysteries took place each year in late September and unfolded over nine days, mirroring the nine days Demeter wandered in search of Persephone. The ceremonies began in Athens, where sacred objects (the *hiera*) were brought from Eleusis and displayed. On about the fifth day, the great procession set out from Athens to Eleusis, nearly 20 kilometers (12.5 miles) away, along the "Sacred Way." Imagine the spectacle: initiates wearing garlands of myrtle, singing hymns to Iacchus (a mystical aspect of Dionysus associated with these rites), and stopping at springs and shrines along the route. Locals would join in or watch as the crowd – which could number in the thousands in a prosperous year – passed by. As dusk fell on Eleusis, the pilgrims arrived dusty and exhausted. They purified themselves one final time in the saltwater bay and gathered at the gateway of the sanctuary, entering a complex that held various shrines and the massive Telesterion hall.

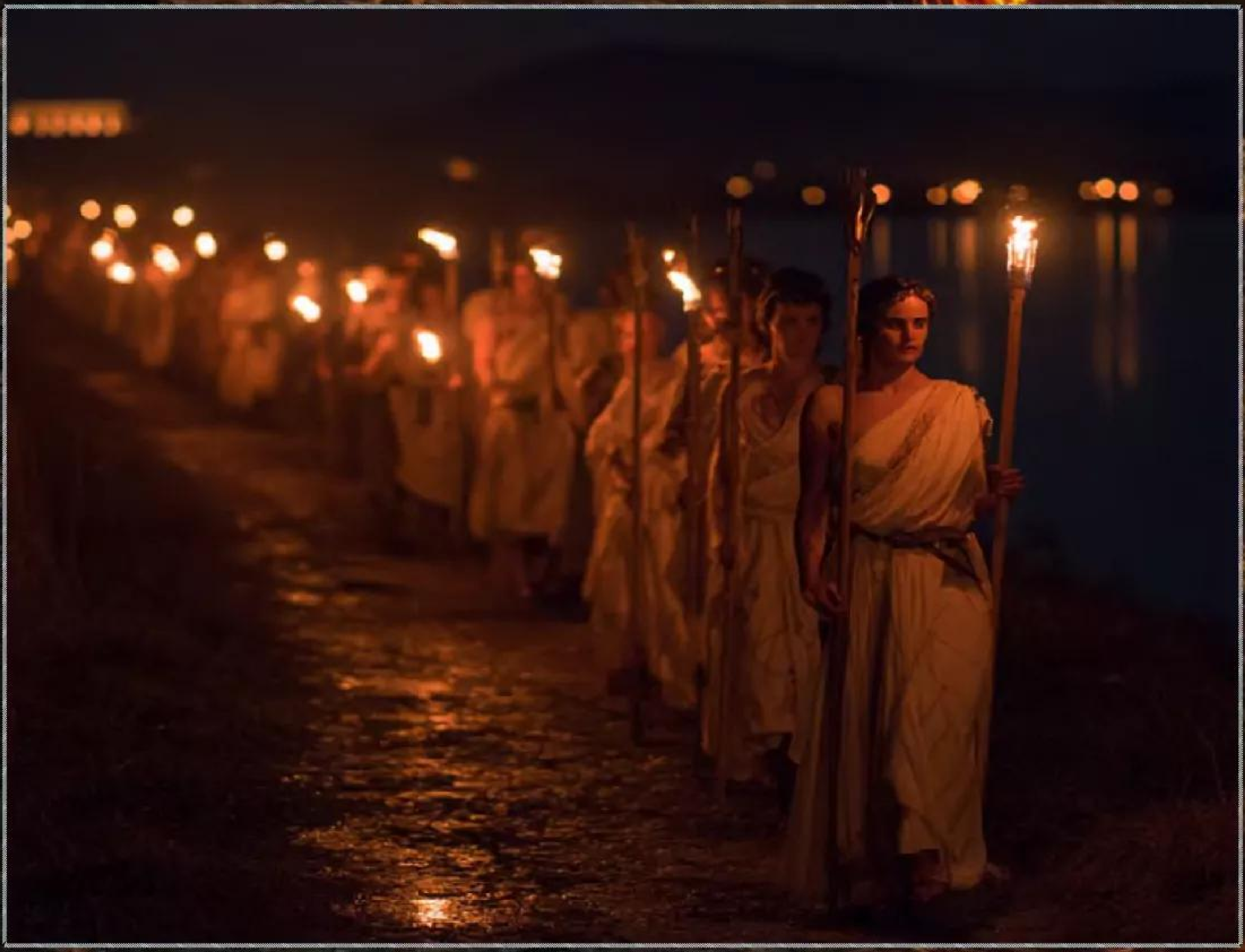
A Secret Cult Activity

TInside the Telesterion, secrecy was absolute. What exactly happened during the climax of the Mysteries remained so well guarded by the initiates that even today we can only piece together fragments. We know that the candidates for initiation, having fasted since dawn, finally broke their fast by drinking a special potion called the kykeon. Then, led by priests and priestesses, they moved through darkness into the core of the hall.

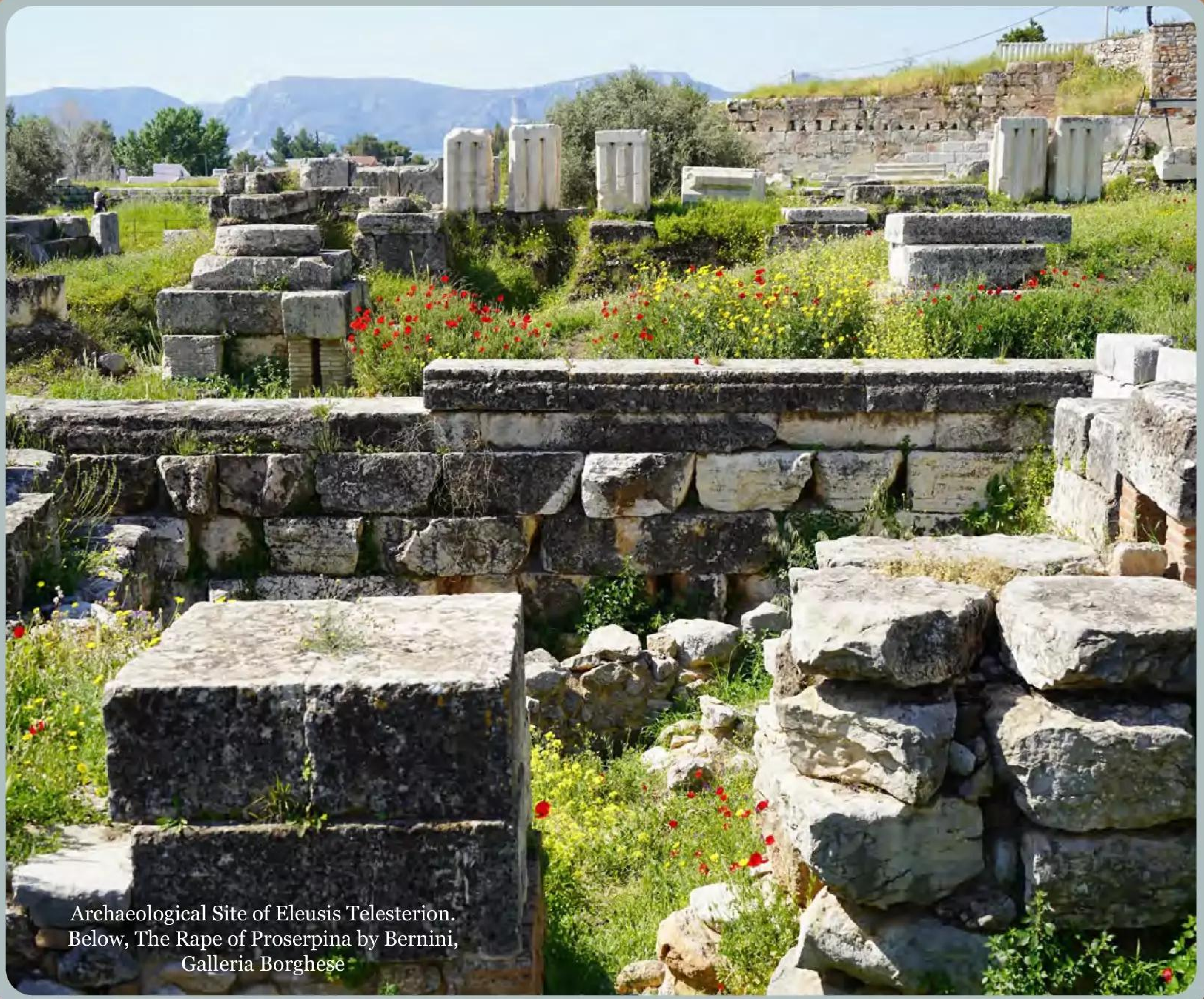
Ancient authors described the initiation experience only in metaphorical terms – but those metaphors are telling. The philosopher Plutarch, who himself participated in the Mysteries, likened the progression of the rites to the journey of a soul after death: first, wandering in confusion, with fearful sights and sounds in the dark; then, a moment of shuddering terror, as if one were approaching the very threshold of Hades; and suddenly, a dazzling light burst forth. In Plutarch's account, at the height of the ritual the initiate is greeted by pure light and opens onto meadowlands with sacred chants and dances, at peace in a glorious revelation.



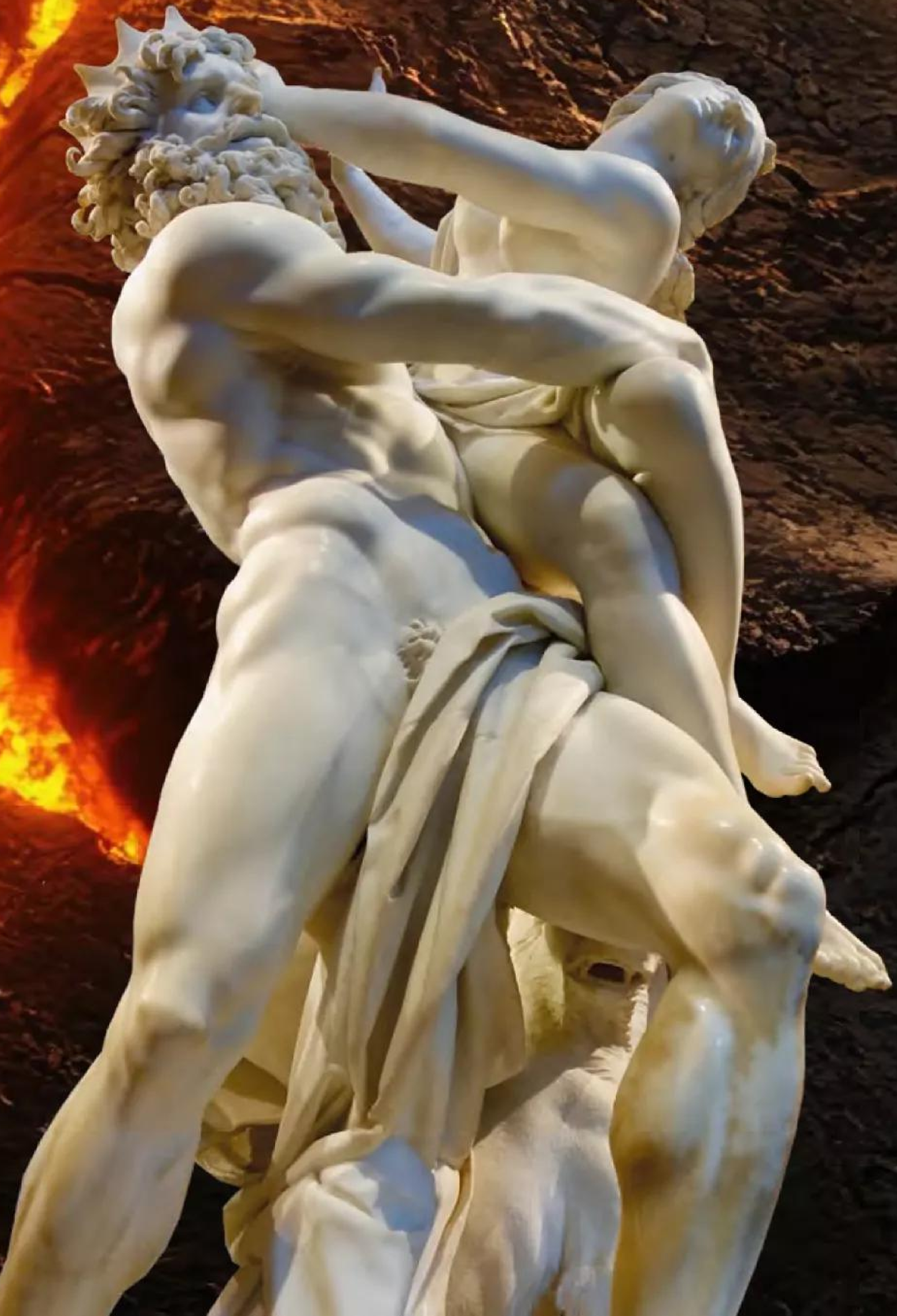
Other hints from antiquity suggest that inside the Telesterion the hierophant (high priest) performed a dramatic reenactment of the Demeter–Persephone myth. Perhaps a grand fire was kindled in the darkness, symbolizing Persephone's ascent or the torch Demeter carried in her search. The hierophant may have shown the initiates sacred objects – the mysteria – that were kept in a special kiste (chest) and calathus (basket). One early Christian writer sneered that the prized secret was nothing more than "an ear of grain, reaped in silence" presented to the initiates. Indeed, a stalk of wheat was a central symbol of the Mysteries – a token of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth that Persephone's story embodies. Yet to the initiates, that moment of unveiling was anything but trivial. Many emerged from the hall in tears of joy, claiming they had witnessed something euphoric and transformative. They had touched the divine and now understood truths that no uninitiated person could imagine. As they later shared a grand communal meal and the celebrations continued till dawn (*pannychis*, an all-night feast), the newly "reborn" initiates were said to be filled with serenity. They believed that having seen the vision of Eleusis, their souls were forever changed – and their fate in the afterlife secured under the protection of the two goddesses.



The emotional effect that the Eleusinian Mysteries had on its participants is difficult to



Archaeological Site of Eleusis Telesterion. Below, The Rape of Proserpina by Bernini, Galleria Borghese

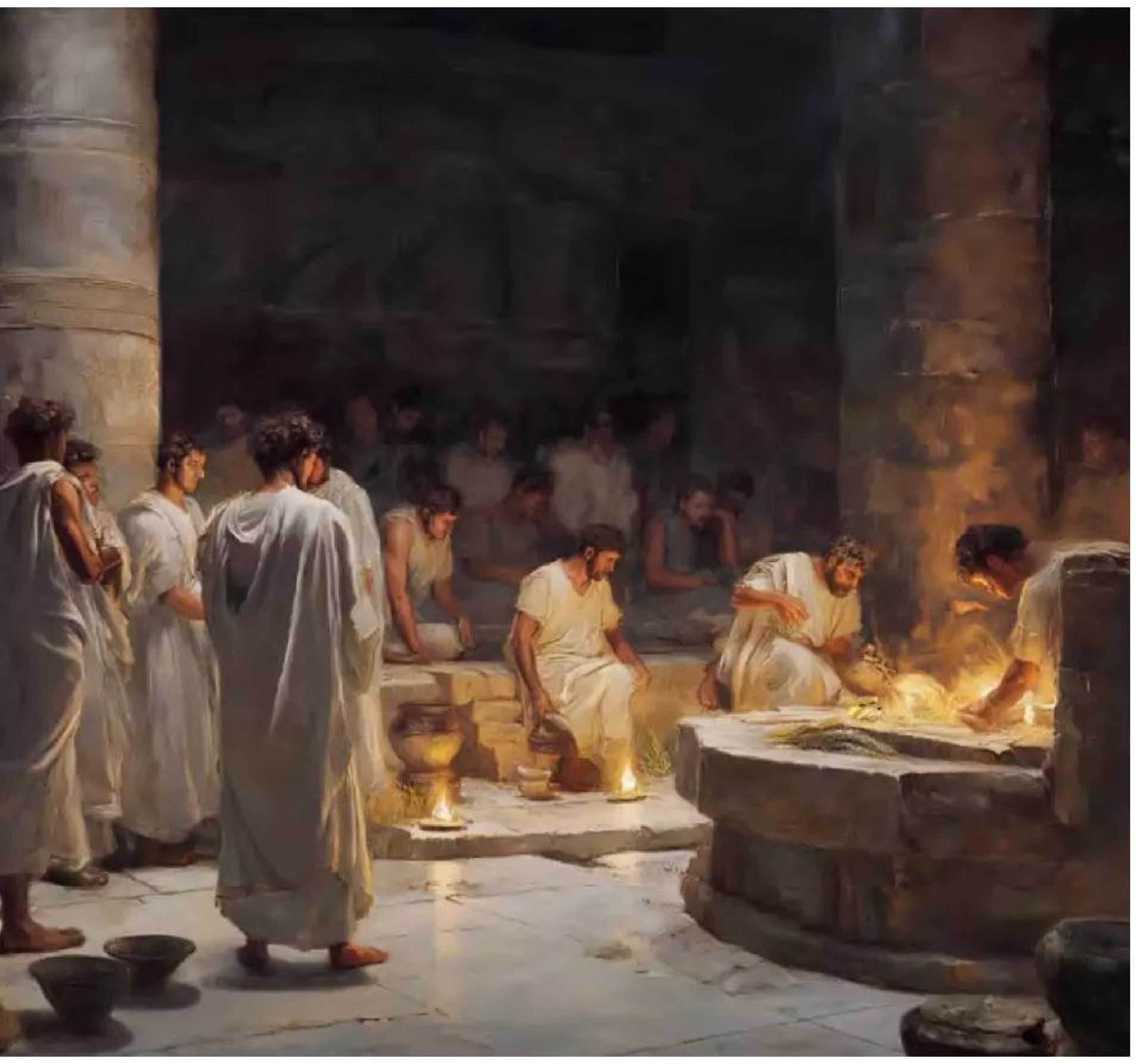


overestimate. In a surviving fragment of the poet Pindar, he declares, happy it is who has seen these things of rites and died, being thus knowing the end and the beginning of life. The multitude of initiates, the peasants, the emperors, all felt that they had been blessed forever, when they left Eleusis. What the Mysteries provided, in the metaphorical sense, was desperately needed in the ancient world - hope in the power of death. Under high death rates and anxiety, Eleusis brought hope that Persephone will show the initiates the way in the underworld and that the life, similarly to the grain, will come to life again despite the darkness of the grave.

This hope of spiritual regeneration and renewal united communities and lured pilgrims all around the Mediterranean, most of which lasted about 2,000 years. No wonder when Greece came under the dominion of Rome, the sanctuary at Eleusis, in spite of the loss of the games, was highly maintained - to receive the emperors it had beautiful temples and marble courts. The long tradition of Eleusinian initiates was only broken in the late 4th century CE at a time when a Christianized empire formally suppressed the pagan ritual. The final hierophants were gagged, the temple has been destroyed, and the mystery of the very reason why the Mysteries were so potent was assigned to oblivion.

Making the Sacred Kykeon Art of War

Of all the mysteries connected with Eleusis there is none which has caused more modern speculation than the kykeon, which the initiates drank on the occasion of the great Mystery. In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, red wine in the course of the cultivation of the then-existing Eleusinian mystery cult is mentioned as being offered to the goddess Demeter during the course of her mourning her lost daughter. She refuses wine because this will not be fit and asks a modest drink of barley meal steeped in water and sweetened with pennyroyal mint. The kykeon is this simple beverage that resembles gruel. All the initiates received the same barley-and-water brew during the Mysteries: on the day of fasting they were all drinking it during the sacred hour, as the revelation in the Telesterion was about to come. The kykeon at first glance appears simple in composition, a farmer kind of a drink, easily made and high in carbohydrates to provide some surge of energy to the partied out celebrants. Even ancient authors refer to kykeon, except in Eleusis, as a refreshment of the worker or the antidote (to the belly). But the importance attached to this potion in the grandest religious ceremony of Greece suggests that it was not an



ordinary refreshment. For years scholars and scientists have been curious: Could there be something more to the kykeon, some unseen component that might have contributed to triggering the vivid images of the Mysteries? The answer to this question yielded one of the most enjoyable interdisciplinary detective stories, in modern classics.

Later in the 1970s an thnomycologist (R. Gordon Wasson), a chemist who had discovered LSD (Dr. Albert Hofmann), and a classical scholar (Carl Ruck) united in an effort to study the Eleusinian kykeon. The notion that the authentic magic of Eleusis was actually the product of an entheogen, a psychoactive substance employed in a religious setting in order to produce mystical state of being, is bold. They indicated that kykeon was not simple barley water, but a well-distilled psychedelic beverage. In particular, Wasson, Hofmann and Ruck suggested that the barley that was used to prepare the kykeon could be infected with a naturally occurring fungus, ergot (Claviceps purpurea), which grows in grains.

Ergot was a widely known contaminate of rye and barley that, in high doses, is capable of inflicting violent disease (the feared saint Anthony fire in the

Middle Ages) but, most importantly, some of the alkaloids in ergot could also generate intense hallucinations. As a matter of fact, Hofmann himself had isolated the lysergic acid compounds of ergot decades ago which resulted in the production of LSD. It was observed by the team that some of the strains of ergot have lysergic acid amide (LSA) and other similar sets of alkaloids which are psychoactive but relatively safe depending on how much is consumed (particularly during water extraction). Had the Eleusinian priests known how to select the proper type of ergot and brew it, they could have produced a potion that has a predictable effect of delivering altered state of consciousness in the initiates, a state which the initiates may attribute to being in contact with gods.

When this "entheogenic theory" of the Mysteries was first published in 1978 (in a book aptly titled The Road to Eleusis), it caused a sensation well beyond academic circles. The notion that ancient Greek priests were essentially distributing a psychedelic beer to thousands of initiates – and that this was the engine of Greece's most revered religious experience – was both startling and intriguing. How would the hierophants have pulled off such pharmacology in 1500 BCE or 500 BCE, without modern science?

Wasson and Hofmann pointed out that the Greek world, as early as Homer's time, was familiar with mind-altering concoctions (there are references to nepenthe, a drug that "chases away sorrow," in the Odyssey). They theorized that Eleusis' hereditary priestly families (the Eumolpidae and Kerykes) could have guarded knowledge of psychoactive plants. Ergot grows as purplish-black clumps (called sclerotia) on cereal grasses; perhaps the priests noticed sheep behaving oddly after grazing on certain mildewed grasses,

or remembered that bread made from spoiled grain could produce strange effects. Over generations, they might have experimented and found a way to harness ergot's visionary properties while minimizing its toxic side effects. Hofmann even proposed a method: by soaking ergot-infected barley in water for hours and mixing it with wood ash or another alkaline substance, the toxic ergotamines could be hydrolyzed (broken down) into less toxic but hallucinogenic compounds like ergonovine and LSA.

In practical terms, the priests could brew a kind of ergot beer – not strongly alcoholic, but psychoactive – that served as the kykeon. The common ingredients (barley, water, mint) would mask the addition of the ergot extract. And because the Eleusinian initiates drank the potion communally in a tightly choreographed setting, the hierophants could ensure everyone received a controlled dose at roughly the same time. About an hour or so later, right on cue, the visions would begin.

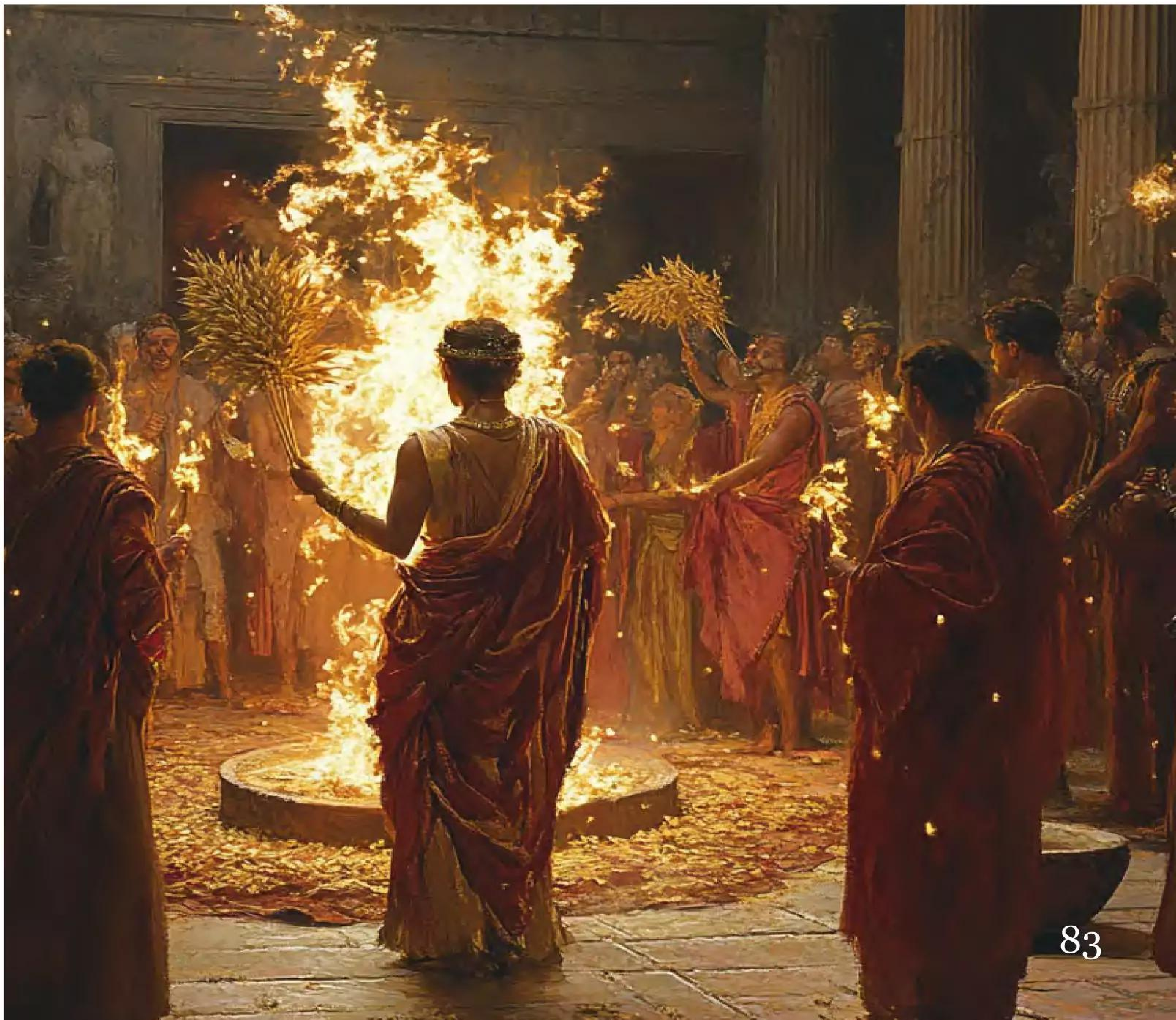
That is a strong conjecture: imagine the situation in the Telesterion at midnight, the room full of hundreds of initiates with black thoughts and black hearts hatched during days of ceremonies and the emotionally colored myth of a mother who lost her child. Hallucination is the first of its kind to many people. Then the walls of normal perception commence crumbling under the double pressure of chanting and torchlight and maybe some strong psychedelic and the controlled hallucination of the rave begins. Others may have the walls of the hall appear to crumble into light. Other people experience intense surges of emotions or the feeling of being in the presence of sacred beings. In the climax the great doors open or a fire bursts, and the hierophant comes forth in a flash of light, bearing aloft one ear of wheat - the most familiar object made by symbol straight to a meaning beyond description. At that moment, under

the influence of the kykeon, one can understand how the thin line between reality and myth might be crossed out. They may literally view Persephone emerging out of the underworld, or Demeter in her glory bestowing favors. This whole process of fasting, purification and the final revelation would then work in collaboration with the psychoactive concoction and would give a controlled mystical experience all of which would seem to cohere absolutely to the initiators in it.

Visions, Fungi and Pursuit of Evidence

The psychedelic kykeon theory was a theory that used to be a while ago, a fascinating one. Lots of classical scholars did not believe. None of the surviving ancient sources, after all, say: the kykeon was the drink that contained a drug. Critics argued that secrecy had become the only possible reason why all ancient writers somehow failed to spill the beans. But again this is to say that we are not in a position to have a smoking-gun textual reference. Some gave alternative explanations: possibly the deeply psychological suggestion and group dynamics of the Mysteries were sufficient to induce altered states of consciousness without pharmacology.

Eschewing a literal interpretation of climax, an example is the argument of the eminent scholar Walter Burkert, that the combination, in fasting and subsequent sacramental wine and food, of a heightened ritual situation with their effects of euphoria and hallucination, may have produced a permanent equivalent to a religious ecstasy. He thought the actual answer may be that the bliss of the initiates may be due to what might be called the famine-feast effect,



and that no exotic drugs need be evoked. Other historians cited the sensory deprivation then overload of incense, music and darkness in the Telesterion, as a natural source of trance like states. There is in addition a certain unease at the notion that a religious experience of such civilizational significance could be as simple as imbibing a mind altering substance. Would this not lower the spiritual message of Eleusis?

Academics such as Giulia Sfameni Gasparro suggested that the revelation of the gods should be the important part of a mystery religion, not chemistry, i.e. that a potion was taken but as part of the background and was most likely incidental or purely symbolic (e.g. the use of communion wine). But the entheogenic theory would not die, partly because it is premised on something that cannot be denied - the experiences at Eleusis, upon it being described, sound like readings of psychedelic visions. The initiates did talk of having achieved a unity with the divine, of light, ecstatic rapture, and the dethroning of fear, which are common themes of mystical experiences in other cultures, and of plant psychedelically-induced rites of shamanism.

Could the ancients have been so lucky as to discover a natural beverage which causes visions? The advocates of the theory continued to search. They revisited old art looking for drug-related images and excavated archaeological sites to find the trace of weird chemicals. As an example, a single researcher, Giorgio Samorini, called attention to an interesting fact concerning Eleusinian iconography: namely, that certain examples of ears of plants (the symbol of Demeter) are illustrated with strange lumpy purple-black growths tangling on the ears. That to a botanist is just what grain infected by ergot looks like. Indeed the Greek vase painting of Demeter giving a sheaf of wheat to Triptolemus (her protege in agriculture) (5th century BCE) shows dark lumps in the wheat ears, which may not have been an artistic flourish of the painter at all but a careful depiction of ergot sclerotia. Could it be the Eleusinian priests actually cultivated, or collected grain infected with the fungus? The thought is an intriguing one, a mystery in plain view on frescos of temples and on vases.

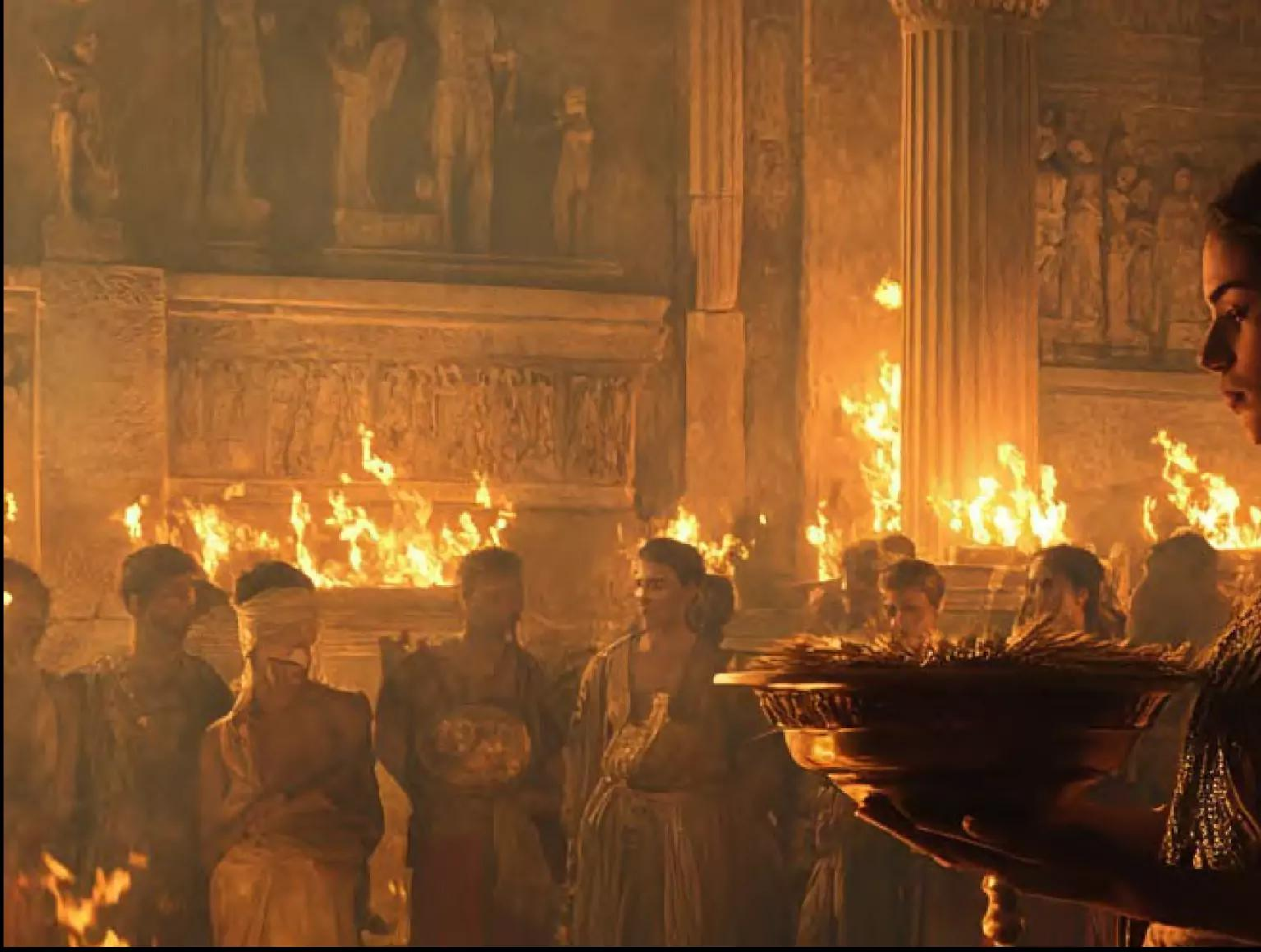
But the strongest argument brought forth in favor of the kykeon secret ingredient was the ground - literally. At the beginning of 1990s and 2000s, archaeologists far outside Greece discovered something amazing. They unearthed a diminutive shrine on a site dated to the 4th century BCE at an ancient Iberian settlement in Spain (Mas Castellar de Pontos) that was devoted to Demeter and Persephone. It was basically a branch of the Eleusinian cult in the western Mediterranean, a fact that recalls that the popularity of the Mysteries was extensive. Within that shrine, the scholars discovered a drinking cup (chalice) and close beside it the skeletal remains of a young person who had been a member of the cult. Applying up-to-date methods to residues left in the cup and even to the calcified dental plaque of the teeth of the man, scientists detected the microscopic shreds of the ergot fungus. That is, there was direct physical evidence ergot was being prepared and eaten in a Demeter/Persephone ritual context. The cup probably contained a drink, and both beer or fermented grains leftovers, as well as ergot sclerotia, order metabolites indicated a mind-altering brew had been consumed, effectively a kind of intake kykeon. What is more shocking, the ergot in the teeth of the man indicated that he had chewed or ingested part of the fungus itself. Archeological record was all but a murmur: yes, it is true, they did chemical-mix the kykeon with the mind-altering fungus.

This find electrified supporters of the entheogenic theory. It's one thing to speculate, however intelligently, but another to hold a centuries-old vessel that literally contains the ingredients of an ancient psychedelic potion. The Mas Castellar discovery demonstrated that some practitioners of Demeter's cult, at least abroad, utilized ergot in their sacred drinks. It gave scientific credence to what Wasson and Hofmann had hypothesized. If it happened in one sanctuary, it very well could have been happening at Eleusis itself – perhaps for centuries – carefully concealed under the authority of the priests. After all, the Eleusinian hierophants had every reason to keep such knowledge secret: the power and sanctity of the Mysteries depended on mystique. Revealing that the gods' epiphany hinged on a fungus could have undermined the ritual's authority (not to mention been dangerous if misused). So, the use of psychoactive kykeon would have been a tightly guarded family secret among the priesthood, passed down through initiation of the priests themselves.

With accumulating evidence from various disciplines, the picture that emerges is that the kykeon potion likely had multiple layers of meaning and effect. Symbolically, it connected the initiates to Demeter's original story (by imitating the drink she chose). Practically, it quenched thirst and gave some nutrition after fasting. Culturally, it was a shared sacrament that bound the participants together in the ritual. And pharmacologically, it very plausibly opened their consciousness to visions.

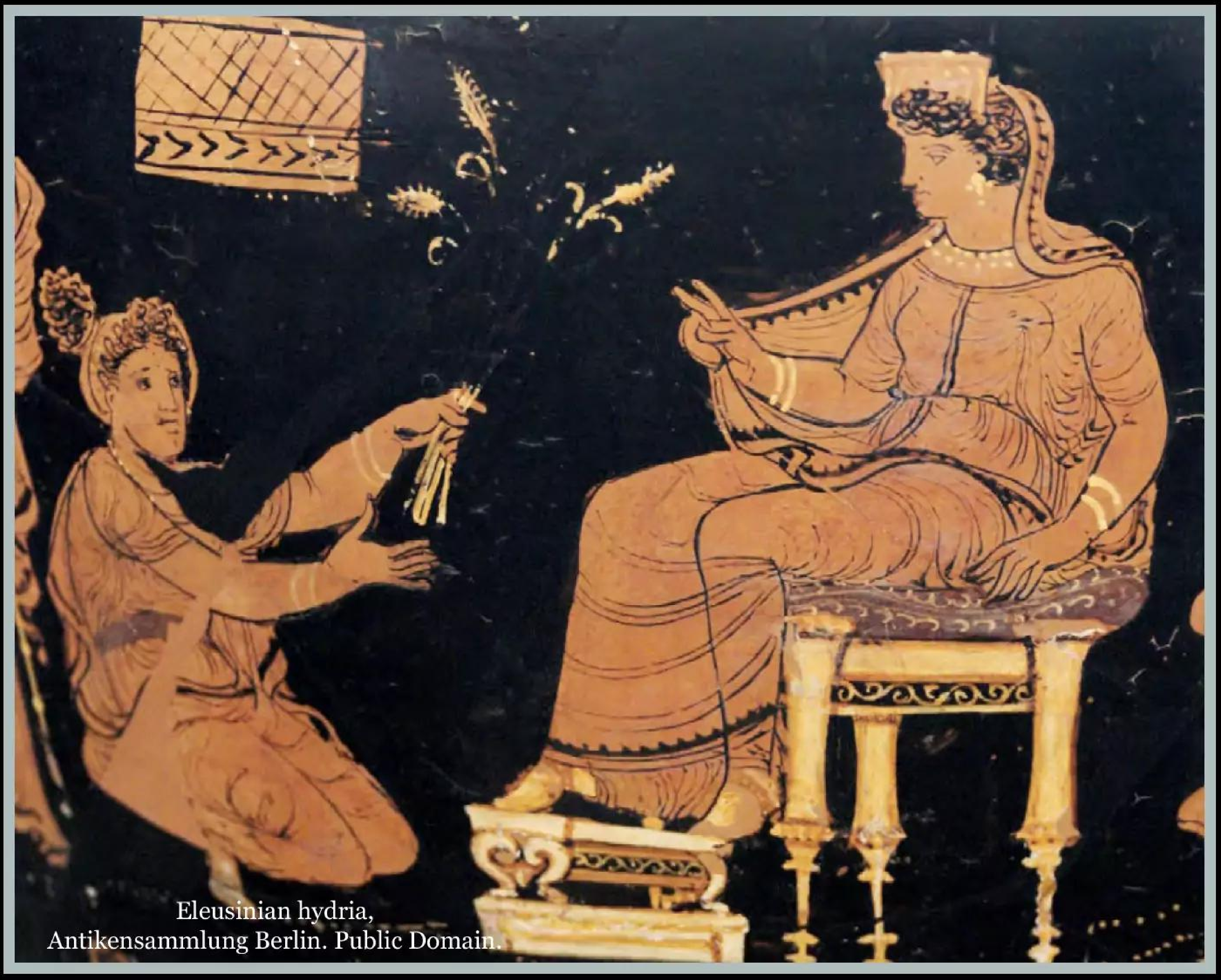
Even some skeptics have softened in the face of the latest data, though debates continue. For instance, while ergot is the prime candidate, others have wondered about additional or alternative psychoactives: could the kykeon have included a bit of opium from poppies (Demeter was often depicted crowned with poppy flowers)? The Greeks certainly knew opium, and a mild dose could synergize with other ingredients to produce a dreamlike state. However, opium's effects are more sedative than visionary, and it might have been impractical to administer to large crowds without risk.

There's also the hypothesis – once championed by psychedelic enthusiast Terence McKenna – that perhaps psilocybin mushrooms were involved. Wild psychedelic mushrooms (like Psilocybe species or Amanita muscaria) grow in many regions, and some ancient cultures used them for spiritual purposes. McKenna speculated that Eleusis might have had a brew or mixture of ergot and mushrooms to ensure a potent trip. Most scholars find this less convincing, as no clear evidence of mushroom use at Eleusis has surfaced (and adding too many ingredients could be dangerous). Still, the broader idea remains: the Eleusinians might have developed a "psychopharmacological complex" – a combination of ritual practices and substances – to induce a controlled mystical experience.



Those Who See

After the initiation, at some time in the pre-dawn hours, when torches still flared in the courtesy of Eleusis, the new initiates, equipped now with new titles (the epoptai, or the light-seers), would gradually re-enter the normal world. They had communed in something that



Eleusinian hydria,
Antikensammlung Berlin. Public Domain.

was simultaneously a drama, a sacrament, and an even more likely chemically altered state of mind. Later it was said by many to have undergone Eleusis, that it was to overcome the fear of death.

We could put that in terms of psychology: the ritual could enable individuals to come to terms with the existence of death and be consoled by a larger cosmic rhythm of existence by using the symbolic discourse and possibly an overwhelming entheogenic experience. A believer going through the ritual of death (passage through darkness and horror in Telesterion) and rebirth into the light, perhaps also felt that they had already practiced what their soul would experience after death. Prepared in this way, they were able to live bravely and morally.

It is true that ancient authors declared many times that initiates alone became better and kinder people, they had been civilized by Demeter. The Mysteries were not a presentation of definite theology or doctrine; Eleusis provided something that was preceded not by a lecture, but experience that could be interpreted by each individual. That no initiate ever betrayed the secret was famously stated, not because there was any law against it, but because human speech was simply incapable of describing it, because something ineffable happened in the hall. In at least a literal sense Eleusinian Mysteries were mysteries.

The faint breath of that original strength is still haunting the visitor today as he gets between fallen columns and grassy mounds in the Eleusis archaeological site (modern Elefsina, in Greece). The remains of the Telesterion may also be seen, though its traces are ruins. Nearby, there was also a rocky cave which, as Persephone was believed to have stepped out to walk the earth, was named Pluto Gate, the very entrance of Hades. Although the marble and torches are lost, we still have the cultural memory of Eleusis in many forms including the literary mentioning to the universal form of initiation as a transformational experience.

Whether the kykeon had a recipe or not is a sort of reminder of how far (or luckily) the ancients might go in natural science without writing works on the subject. Eleusis was perhaps the largest controlled experiment in altered consciousness in history: it lasted almost two millennia; and it guaranteed qualitative transformation of the ego. By psychological strategy, godly grace, pharmacological skill and/or a combination of the three working in concord, the Mysteries gave a thrust to the human being towards the suggested contact with immortality.

Even as this intersection between religion and chemistry has further intrigued the modern researchers, emerging information would sometimes help illuminate the possible means through which the Eleusinain priests could have achieved their objectives. However, we will never get to know all the details for certain. Well perhaps that is as well. The Eleusinian Mysteries help us to remember that there are things that make us what we are but are impossible to explain properly. Experiences that were kept with silence along with honor by ancient people. Nowadays in our age of science, we are able to resort to chemical analysis of the residue of the kykeon or we are able to deconstruct the myths that were around, but the kernel of the Eleusinian experience, the deep sense of oneness and rebirth, had to be experienced to be believed.

It is pleasant to picture an initiate, who has gone forth out of the Telesterion just as the sun is breaking in the morning over the cornfields of Eleusis, and when he sees the dew obscuring the barley and feels that he has comprehended for the first time the everlasting spring of the world. The secret potion, the sacred night, the dreaming of the goddess, all were strains in a web of change. And in the end the biggest riddle of Eleusis, not the mystery of what chemical was in the cup, but the timeless human struggle it represents, the eternal desire to be close to heaven and to know a meaning outside this mortal sphere. ■

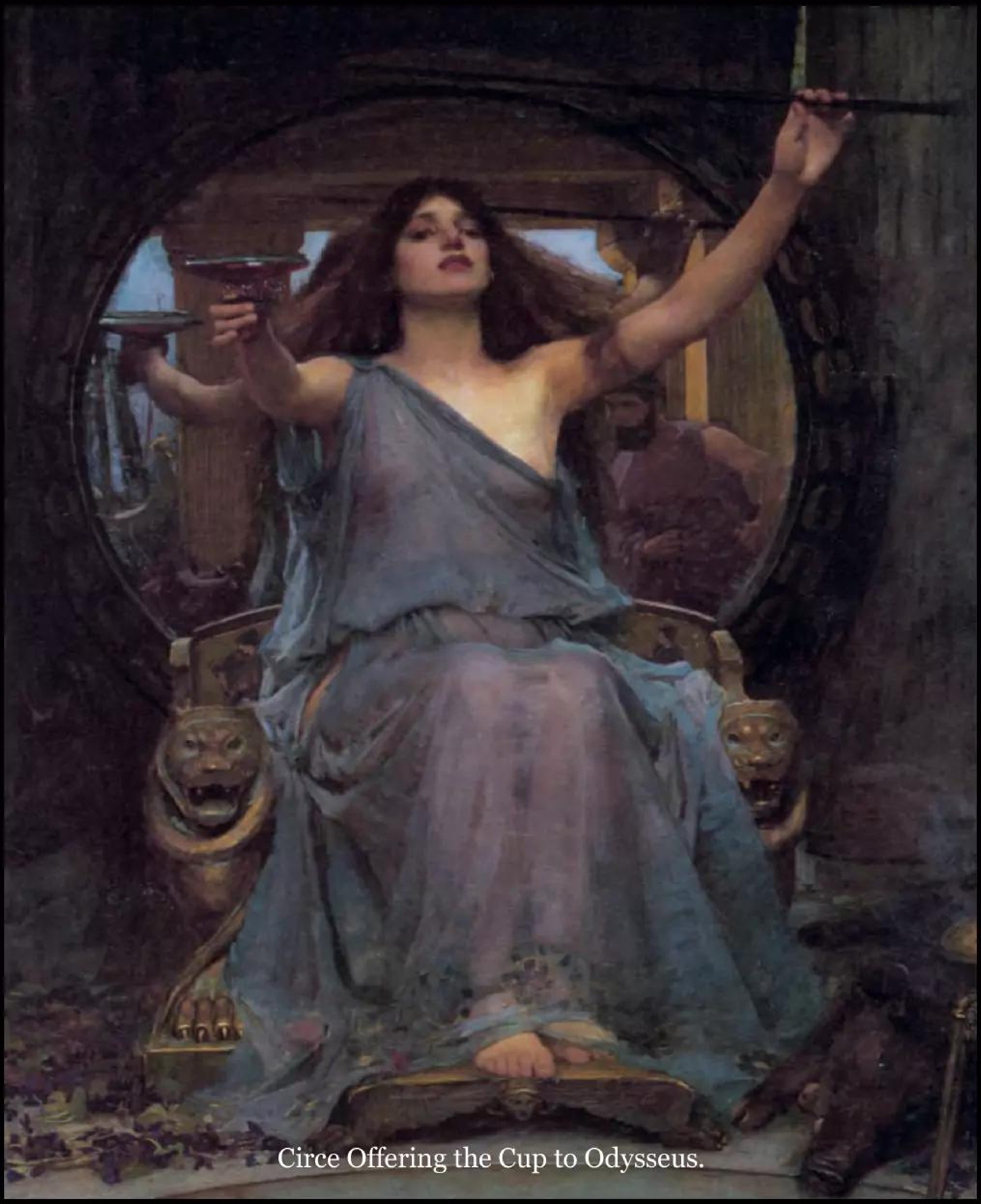
PSYCHEDELIC SECRETS OF ELEUSIS?

The Entheogenic Kykeon Hypothesis in Historical and Scientific Perspective

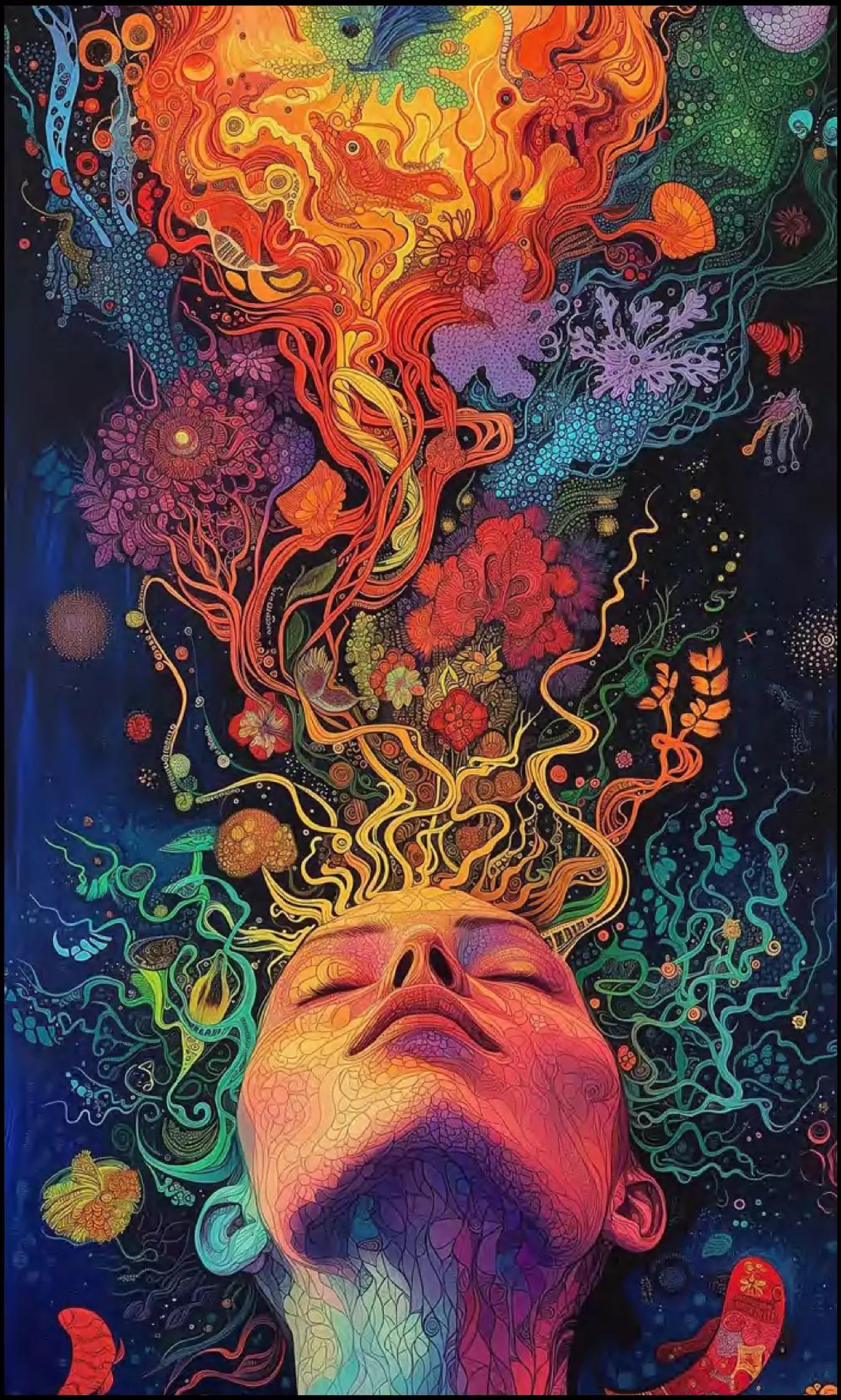
Plaque Campana Initiation of Eleusinian Mysteries, Public Domain.

The Eleusinian Mysteries of ancient Greece have been an object of interest to historians, archeologists, as well as philosophers ever since their existence in almost two millennia. And Pindar and Sophocles wrote invokingly of the reveals of Eleusis: they called the Initiates blessed and thrice happy because they were the men who had seen those things, “which after a man has gone forth, it is not possible any more even to hear of them”. This was not a doctrine lesson but rather a dramatic vision and as Aristotle put it, one did not learn something but experienced some feelings during the ceremonial practices and Plutarch described the peak which caused dizziness and sweating among those who took part. These reports implies a bodily, psychedelic experience in Eleusis a divine vision so great that those who experienced it vowed not to speak about it or they would die.

There was a humble ritual drink, the kykeon, a potion of barley and herbs that initiates consumed following several days of fasting, at the center of this mystery. The kykeon is directly connected with the founding myth of the Mysteries (the Homeric Hymn to Demeter) where Demeter herself is offered drink, a mixture of barley, water and pennyroyal mint. Its use in the ceremonies is attested by ancient sources: initiates later repeated as component of their secret formula: I fasted; I drank the kykeon. In every traditional sense the kykeon was a simple, wholesome drink; it was not the drink of revelation. And how did a simple barley drink bring about the mystic visions of which the Eleusiniac rites are a record? Was the power of the Mysteries merely of the symbolic ritual and psychological suggestion, or was the psychoactive secret in the kykeon? This question drives the modern entheogenic hypothesis of the Eleusinian Mysteries. First proposed in 1978 by ethnomycologist R. Gordon Wasson, chemist Albert Hofmann, and classicist Carl Ruck in The Road to Eleusis, the theory boldly suggests that the kykeon was potently spiked with a natural psychedelic. In their view, a fungus called ergot – parasitic on barley and rich in LSD-like alkaloids – was the key ingredient that “unveiled” the visions of Eleusis. The word



Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus.



kykeon in Greek simply means a “mixture” – often a thick gruel or drink of mixed grains, herbs, and liquid. In everyday life it was a wholesome concoction, used as a fortifying meal substitute or a medicinal draught. Literary sources describe varied recipes: Homer’s Iliad has a kykeon of grated goat cheese, barley and wine, while in the Odyssey the sorceress Circe infamously spiked a honey-sweet kykeon with a magic herb to bewitch Odysseus’ crew. In the Eleusinian Mysteries, the kykeon took on special significance as part of re-enacting Demeter’s sorrowful quest for Persephone. The Homeric Hymn to Demeter relates that when the grieving goddess arrived at Eleusis, she refused wine but accepted a humble potion of barley, water and pennyroyal mint. By drinking this, Demeter established the precedent: thereafter initiates of Eleusis would also break their sacred fast by drinking the kykeon, symbolically communing with the goddess. Ancient commentators like Clement of Alexandria preserve the initiates’ own testimony: “I fasted, I drank the draught (kykeon); I took from the chest…” – a formula recited by the initiated to summarize their ritual actions. We are told by the sources that the chief ingredients of kykeon were barley meal, water, and perhaps an aromatic herb (pennyroyal, Mentha pulegium). Notably, it was a non-alcoholic beverage – a deliberate substitute for wine, corresponding to Demeter's rejection of wine in the myth. Pennyroyal, the herb included, possesses very weak calming effects in small quantities, but is toxic in large quantities. There is no definite proof that the ancient recipe contained any manifest intoxicant. Indeed, the majority of classical descriptions present the kykeon as a bland, innocuous drink – something to slake the thirst of the initiates following their travel and fasting. This has caused the majority of researchers to conclude the function of the kykeon was essentially symbolic and practical: a ritual drink in honor of Demeter and to slake thirst, as opposed to a psychedelic beverage. For example, one scholar has contended that the kykeon was really a rejuvenating draught administered to weary initiates after a fast and labels the suggestion of hallucinogens in the brew as mere speculation. In fact, no ancient writer explicitly declared the kykeon to have caused hallucinations or ecstasy, and drugs such as mushrooms or exotic herbs are never directly associated with it.

But the issue remains – how to explain the "wondrous visions" and "unspeakable sights" initiates saw. The epopteia, the initiation night at Eleusis, was performed in the Telesterion, a dark room where secret items were exhibited and a dramatic reenactment of the Demeter–Persephone myth occurred. Fasting, all-night chanting, torchlit processions, and the solemn mood of sacred anticipation all must have set participants up for an experience that changed their lives. Other historians suggest that the psychology of ritual itself – augmented by symbolic props such as the unveiling of a reaped ear of corn (symbolizing Persephone's return and the cycle of life) – might have induced euphoria and a feeling of divine vision in the initiates. The culmination of the rite, in the later tradition's accounts, was "an ear of grain, cut in silence" held aloft by the high priest, symbolizing the energy of new life sprung from death. This degree of symbolism, along with the shared emotional experience, could have triggered a religious revelation without any pharmacological help. Its meaning was ritual, not psychedelic – connecting initiates to Demeter through the same simple drink she consumed. In the words of one recent summary, "most scholars discount any reference to the kykeon as a sacramental draught" chemically inducing the visions, emphasizing instead the "mystic union" achieved through faith, myth, and the richly staged ceremonies.

The Road to Eleusis: An Entheogenic Theory Emerges

Contrary to this traditional interpretation, Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck's entheogenic hypothesis offers an intriguing counter-challenge: could it have been that the Eleusinian priests of antiquity did indeed have a pharmacological secret after all, but extremely well concealed

behind the innocuous formula of barley and water? In The Road to Eleusis (1978), banker-turned-mycologist R. Gordon Wasson (well known for his discovery of the use of psychedelic mushrooms in Mexico), chemist Albert Hofmann (LSD discoverer), and classicist Carl A.P. Ruck collaborated to “lift the veil” on what they thought was the real secret of the Mysteries. They contended that barley utilized in kykeon is perhaps intentionally infected with a psychoactive fungus – ergot (Claviceps species) – that has powerful alkaloids which can cause visionary experiences.

Ergot was familiar in ancient history: a darkish fungal growth on rye and barley grain that, when milled into flour or ingested, could cause deadly epidemics of ergotism (also called St. Anthony’s fire). The signs of ergot poisoning are burning feet and hands, convulsions, delirium and hallucinations – unpleasant side effects documented throughout the centuries. But Hofmann and his colleagues speculated that not all ergots are the same. Some ergot species, or some preparations, yield mainly hallucinogenic alkaloids (lysergic acid derivatives) free of the perilous vasoconstrictive toxins. As it happened, Hofmann’s own laboratory research in the 1930s had already demonstrated that the chemical nucleus of ergot, lysergic acid, could produce profoundly psychoactive compounds – most spectacularly LSD, which Hofmann isolated from ergot-based sources in 1938. It was this recognition that Hofmann brought to the Eleusis hypothesis: if contemporary science had been able to extract LSD from ergot, could not ancient priests have discovered how to concoct a less concentrated but still effective ergot-based potion?

Hofmann outlined a feasible process. Ergot consists of a mix of alkaloids, some very toxic and some hallucinogenic. Of special interest is the fact that the psychedelic ergot alkaloids (namely ergonovine and lysergic acid amide, or ergine) are water-soluble, while the more toxic ergot alkaloids (i.e., ergotamine and ergocornine) are much less so. This would make an aqueous extraction – essentially soaking ergot in water – theoretically rinse the psychoactive compounds out and leave many of the harmful ones as residue. As Hofmann put it, "with the techniques and equipment available in antiquity it was therefore easy to prepare a hallucinogenic extract from suitable kinds of ergot". The "suitable" ergot in this case being one whose alkaloid profile leaned in the psychedelic direction. Ergot can parasitize several grasses; the authors cited Claviceps paspali, a wild grass ergot, and Claviceps purpurea on cereals as contenders known to produce lysergic acid amides (the chemical precursors of LSD) in bulk.

The Eleusinian priests might have brewed a psychotropic concoction if they planted out the ergot-infected grain – the barley "spurs" known as sclerotia – and soaked them in the kykeon. The barley in the drink would then be "ergotized" without the knowledge of the initiates. Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck suggested that this was the closely kept secret handed down from generation to generation of Eleusinian hierophants (priests). The governing aristocratic families – Eumolpidae and Kerykes – would have rigidly maintained the knowledge of the entheogenic additive as esoteric, so that outsiders (and initiates themselves) were unaware of the precise reason for the divine visions. To the devotees, the effect would have seemed purely supernatural; only the priests who were mixing the kykeon had to be aware of the naturalistic recipe underlying the miracle.

The ergot-kykeon hypothesis neatly solves a number of mysteries: it explains the uniform awe and hallucination-like accounts of the Mysteries, and it fits with the agricultural context of Demeter's cult (a grain fungus secreted in the grain drink). It also finds echoes in analogous cases of entheogenic sacraments – e.g., indigenous Mexican cults using Ololiuqui (morning glory seeds containing lysergic acid amide) for visions, or Vedic Soma speculations involving psychoactive plants. Wasson and Hofmann noted that the same alkaloids in Mexican morning glories (LSA, ergonovine, etc.) may be represented in a Greek kykeon through ergot. They even implied that Greek mythology had retained clues: in an ancient dictionary, one of Demeter's ancient titles is Erysibe – the Greek term for "ergot" (the grain fungus blight) – suggesting a secret connection between harvest goddess and mind-altering fungus. Although that coincidence does not constitute proof, it is interesting.

In order to minimize the danger of ergot's toxins, preparation

methods were discussed by the authors. Besides the water extraction, they also examined the possibility of whether the Greeks could have used particular strains of ergot or detoxification methods. For instance, Claviceps paspali (infesting native grasses) contains mainly clavine alkaloids that are said to be more hallucinogenic and less gangrenous than C. purpurea on rye. Alternatively, the kykeon brewers might have mixed the ergot with substances (like lime or wood ash) to hydrolyze and break down the more toxic compounds – a hypothetical procedure since lost. In later years, researchers have indeed speculated that prolonged brewing or fermentation of ergot could reduce its toxicity and enrich its psychoactive fraction. All circumstantial, perhaps, but it does give an impression of how a priest-chemist in ancient times may have succeeded in a consistently entheogenic kykeon. Carl Ruck even speculated on a two-stage initiation: perhaps a psilocybin mushroom or dried Amanita muscaria was used in initiatory rites preparatory to the Telesterion, with the kykeon containing ergot saved for the ultimate vision within the Telesterion itself. This remains speculative, but it emphasizes the fact that a number of psychoactive fungi and plants would have been potentially available in the ancient Mediterranean.

Soon after the release of The Road to Eleusis, other scholars piled in with amendments. Some, such as Mark Merlin, proposed that the entheogenic kykeon could have contained opium from poppies along with ergot, pointing out that the opium poppy is quite often linked to Demeter in myth and artwork. (Clement of Alexandria, in parodying the Eleusinian mysteries, actually placed "poppy seeds" and a serpent among the sacramental objects in Demeter's kiste or chest, leaving it possible that opium – an euphoriant and sedative – had some role, if only symbolic.) Enthusiasts like Terence McKenna argued instead for psilocybin mushrooms as the active principle, deeming ergot too dangerous; he proposed that wild mushrooms (perhaps growing on dung in the fields) could have been collected and infused into the kykeon. A second researcher, Ivan Grigoriev, identified Claviceps paspali as a less toxic ergot with "LSD-like" activity that might have been used if it was harvested from wild grasses near Eleusis. The entheogenic hypothesis has therefore developed over the decades into a broader discussion of other natural psychedelics that may have been involved at Eleusis – ranging from ergot alkaloids to tryptamine mushrooms or even beer made from fermented grain.

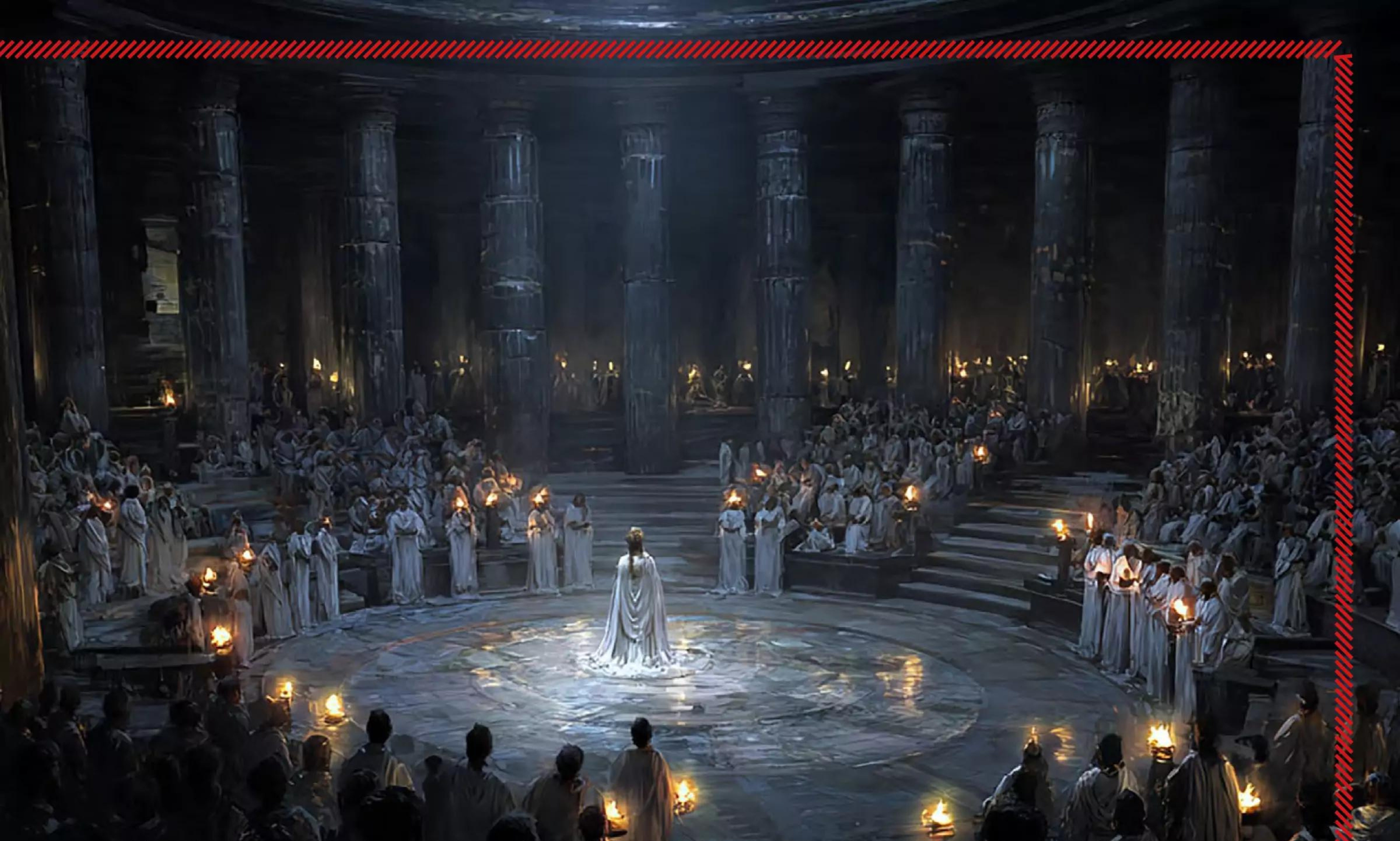
Ergot Alkaloids and LSD: Neurochemical Parallels

At the heart of the entheogenic hypothesis is the dramatic chemical link between ergot and LSD. Lysergic acid diethylamide

(LSD) is, in fact, a semi-synthetic compound derived from an ergot alkaloid. Albert Hofmann's now mythic synthesis of LSD in 1938 was from ergotamine, an alkaloid he had extracted from Claviceps purpurea. His accidental ingestion of an infinitesimal quantity in April 1943 was the first LSD trip – demonstrating the compound's astounding psychoactive potency. It took only LSD's discovery to prove that ergot has psychedelic molecules lying in wait in its poisonous arsenal. Hofmann himself went on to author an analysis of ergot alkaloids, observing that certain ones (such as ergonovine and lysergic acid amide) "contain the same alkaloids as in the Mexican hallucinogenic morning glories" and can be extracted with water. Chemically, LSD and natural lysergic acid amides have in common an indole-based skeleton. The distinction is that the diethylamide substitution of LSD renders it much more potent and capable of crossing the blood-brain barrier with ease. However, the ergot amides (e.g., ergine/LSA or ergonovine) are active compounds in their own right – they are recognized to produce sedation and mildly hallucinogenic properties, as evidenced by the traditional use of morning glory seeds (which are a source of LSA) to induce visionary states. If the Eleusinian kykeon did indeed have an ergot content, the initiates were quite possibly imbibing a mixture of those lysergic alkaloids – a sort of crude, natural equivalent of LSD.

Contemporary neuropharmacology has significantly enhanced our knowledge about how LSD and the other ergot alkaloids act on the brain. LSD is more commonly referred to as the "prototypical psychedelic" and is an ergot-derived hallucinogenic. At a molecular level, LSD acts on a broad range of neurotransmitter receptors – it is a promiscuous agonist at many of the serotonin receptors in the brain, as well as some dopamine and adrenergic receptors. In particular, LSD has very strong affinity for the 5-HT2A serotonin receptor, which is thought to be the primary inducer of the psychedelic effect in the cortex. By activating 5-HT2A receptors in frontal regions of the brain, LSD causes changed sensory perception, ego-dissolution, and kaleidoscopic hallucinations typical of the psychedelic experience.
Other ergot alkaloids, such as ergonovine and ergotamine, also exhibit activity at many of these receptors – ergotamine's pharmacological action is identical to LSD's in vitro, for instance – but there are profound structural differences which render ergotamine less capable of inducing the psychedelic state of mind. Ergotamine, due to its large peptide-like extension, does not easily cross the blood-brain barrier and is biased in its signaling at receptors (more antagonist or partial agonist at some brain locations). The smaller, more nimble structure of LSD, however, is a full agonist or partial agonist at 5-HT2A and a number of other CNS receptors, thus triggering the cascade of neural effects experienced as hallucinations. Briefly, LSD contains the ergoline ring structure of the ergot alkaloids with a perfect chemical "key" to inducing profound psychedelic activity in the human mind.

How does that bear on Eleusis? If the kykeon did indeed contain ergot alkaloids (such as ergonovine or lysergic acid amide), then such drugs would activate some of the same receptors as LSD – though less potently. There is a dose-effect factor: ergonovine, for instance, is roughly 1/10th as active as LSD on a weight basis, and LSA is said to have only mild psychedelic effects with more sedate, dream-like ones. Although an initiatory dose may have been large, particularly if the extract was concentrated. Interestingly, a reconsideration of ergot-derived psychedelics from the 2020s mentions that these sorts of drugs (also referred to as "clavine alkaloids") have been less researched than LSD or psilocybin but clearly affect serotonin and dopamine receptors in a way that can change perception. To take an example, ergonovine (ergometrine) was employed in midwifery practice for its uterotonic action but also sometimes noted to produce visions or delirium when given in high dosage. Current biochemical studies confirm that several ergot alkaloids, such as agroclavine and lysergol, are active at 5-HT receptors and may possess psychoactive properties. So from a neurochemical perspective, it's by no means improbable that the individual who imbibes a brew infused with the correct combination of ergot alkaloids



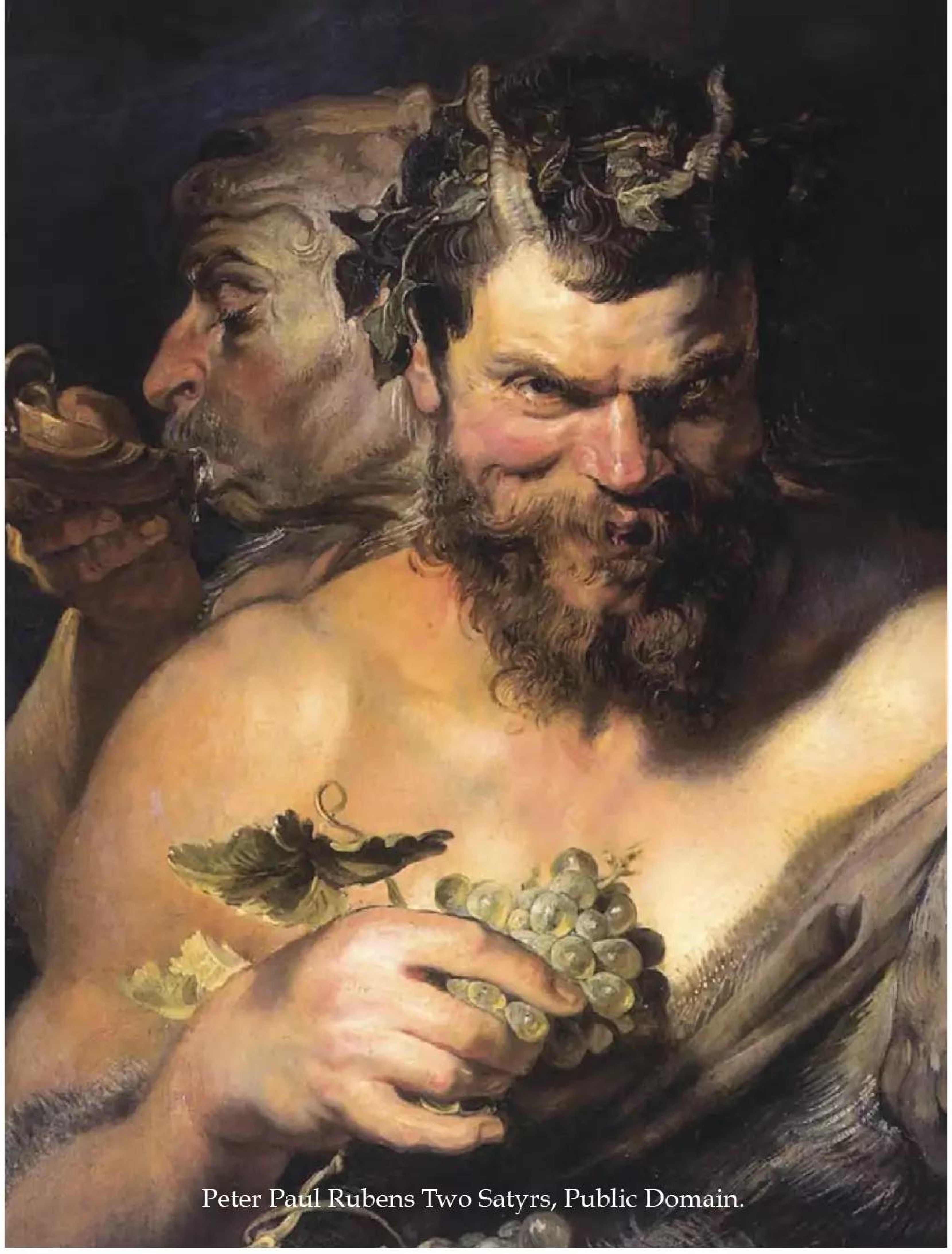
would undergo an altered state of consciousness – not always as clear-cut and advanced as a pure LSD experience, perhaps, but one with visionary and transcendent feelings nonetheless. The advocates of the entheogenic theory propose that the Eleusinian set and setting – the anticipation of experiencing the divine, the dramatic ritual setting – might have intensely enhanced the subjective impact of a modest psychedelic dose to produce a complete mystical experience. Contemporary psychopharmacology also underscores such context-dependence: even with LSD, the mindset and setting of the user determine whether the experience will be hellish or visionary. At Eleusis, all was directed towards wonder and illumination, preparing initiates for a favorable, life-changing vision.

What is interesting is that Hofmann's co-authors were not relying on imagination – there was ethnobotanical precedent. Mesoamerican native ritual employed lysergic acid amide through Rivea corymbosa (Ololiuqui seeds) to produce visions, but typically with concomitant side effects such as nausea. The Eleusinian kykeon, if it provided a cleaner mix of ergine and allied alkaloids, would have been less nauseating and more manageable than ingesting seeds. In addition, by 2021, archaeological science contributed an irresistible data point: ergot residues have been found in an ancient ritual context associated with Demeter. At the Spanish site of Mas Castellar (Girona), a 4th-century BC sanctuary of the Two Goddesses (Demeter and Persephone), investigators found remains of ergot fungus within a ceramic chalice, along with microscopic ergot particles in the dental plaque of a man who was buried there. This demonstrates that an ergot-based drink was indeed produced and consumed in a Demeter/Persephone cult setting, strongly supporting the likelihood of conscious use of ergot in ritual beverages. As one of them states, this finding "gave some credibility" to the Wasson-Hofmann-Ruck theory of an entheogenic kykeon. Though the temple at Eleusis itself has yielded no such direct residue (organic material does not tend to survive in Greece's acidic earth), the Spanish discovery confirms that the ancients themselves were aware of ergot's effect and were even willing to utilize it in a ceremonial setting. It is an interesting confirmation that the "drink of visionary barley" was not a modern fantasy. ■

The Orgiastic Rites of Bacchanalia

Divine Ecstasy: Altered States in Ancient Rome

BY MASSIMO BONASORTE

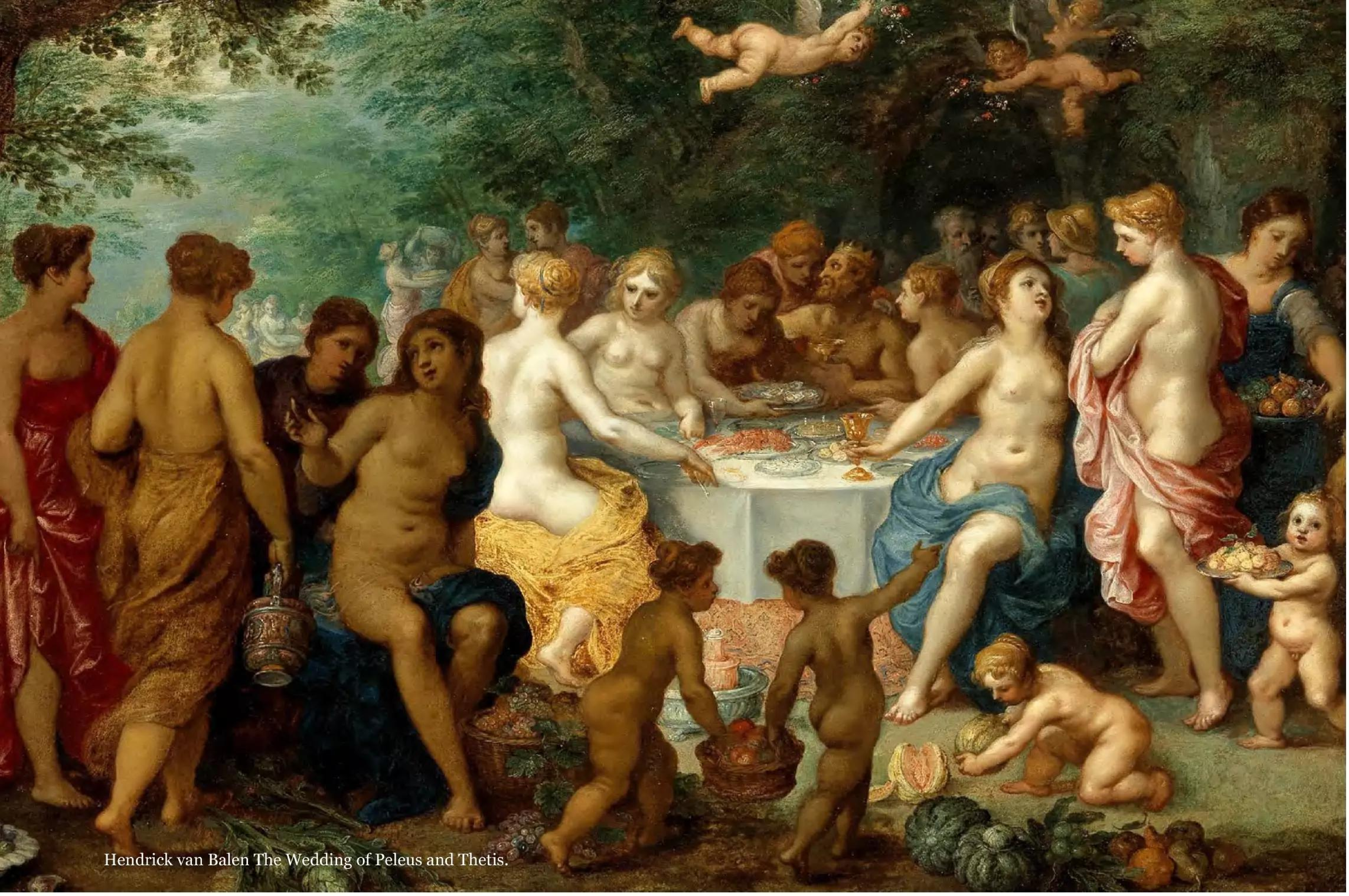


Peter Paul Rubens Two Satyrs, Public Domain.

In the dim torchlight of a Roman grove, worshipers of Bacchus swayed in frenetic dance. Men and women of all ranks drank wine until their senses spun, their voices raised in wild song. There followed no mere feast, but a clandestine Bacchanalia, a ritual of the mysteries of Dionysus, which came into being as a means of breaking the ties of social custom through sexual passion and ecstatic rapture. These rituals offered salvation (in the form of insanity and a mystical rapport with the divine) as well as instilling fear into the conservative elite in Rome. This article will follow chronologically the development of these Dionysian rituals, they began in Greece and reached their infamous climax in the Bacchanalian scandal in Rome, amongst the wild ecstatic nature of the rituals, their symbolic significance, and the backlash of the political outcry against them.

From Greek Mysteries to Roman Bacchanalia

Rome's origin myth reads like a gritty script: twin Dionysus, who was under Greek tradition, was worshiped as the deity of wine, fertility as well as ritual madness. Dionysus was neither authoritative like Olympian gods nor was he born of one of them; he was a foreigner, a vagrant deity that was supposed to arrive in other countries (Phrygia or Thrace).

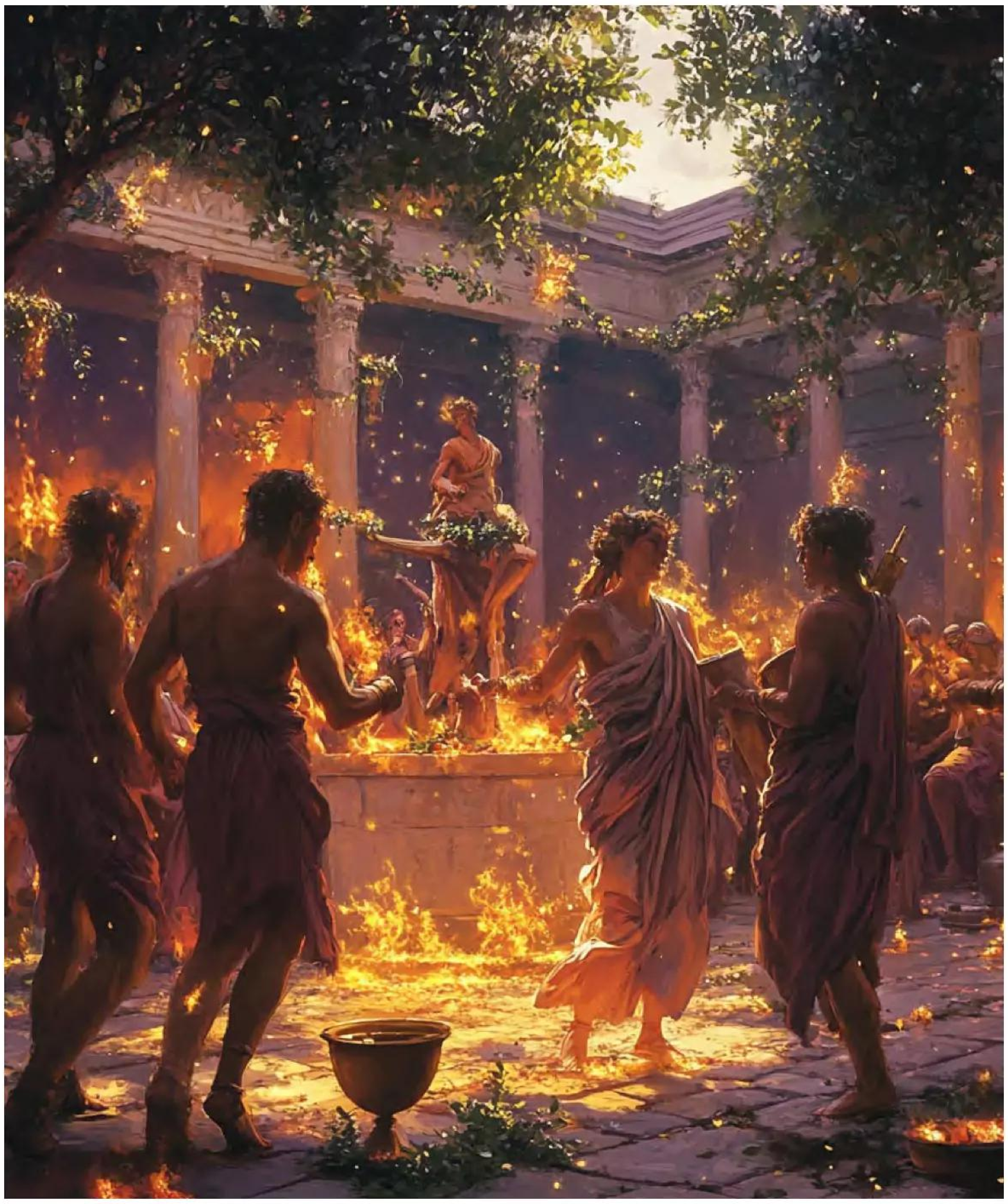


Hendrick van Balen The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis.

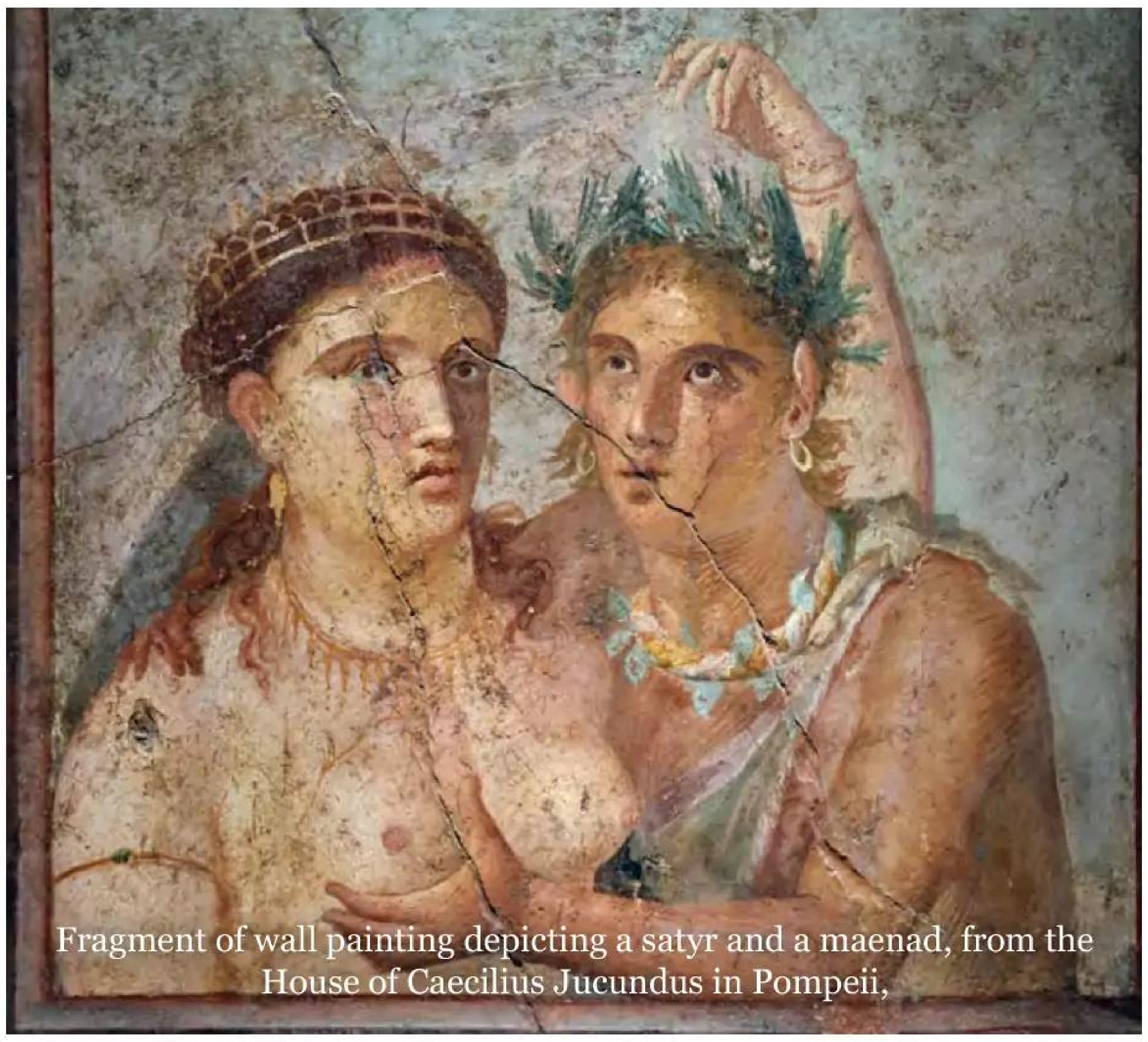
His cult was particularly attractive to the women, who were called maenads (the raving ones), and abandoned their households to walk the hills overnight as they worshiped Dionysus. According to classical sources and artwork, there were major distinctions of these Dionysian mysteries: drugging wine, pounding music of drums and flutes, and wild dancing got one into a trance state of being possessed by the deity.

The dance of Dionysus was never intended to be cut to a rhythm and the choreographed ritual of other Greek cults; the Dionysian dance was intended to be freewheeling, personalized, and extemporaneous, an instant of divine madness and freedom where worshiper tasted the madness of divinity. The participants, who used to resemble the mythical satyrs and maenads in their visual depictions, would twirl, screech and practice omophagia, a belief in symbolically eating raw meat, as was imitated by the very stories of the god of dissection and regeneration itself (told by the myth of Zagreus).

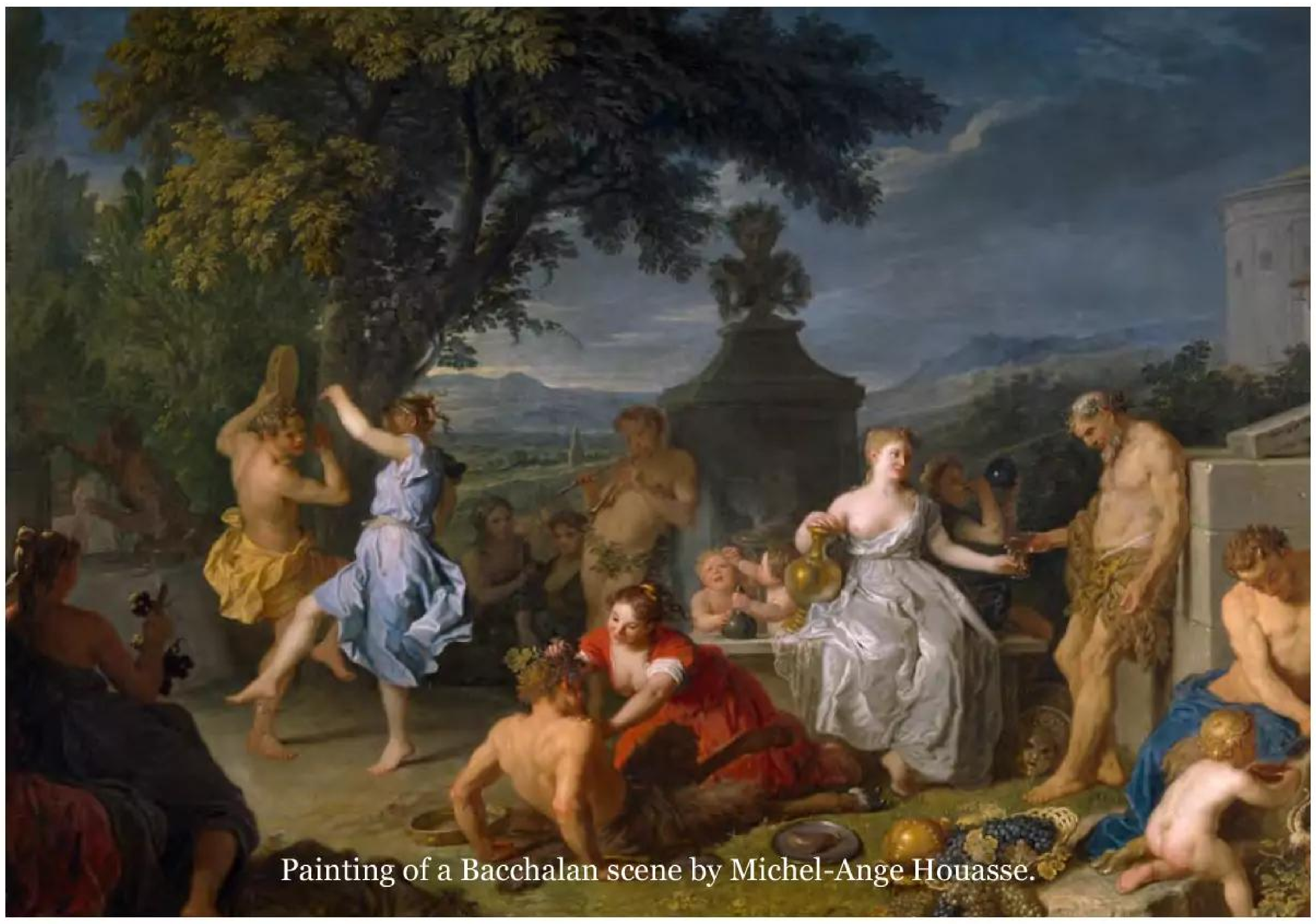
The aim of initiates using these orgia (sacred rites) was a transcendent escape of natural



Gerard van Honthorst Satyr seduce a nymph. Rijksmuseum. Public Domain.



Fragment of wall painting depicting a satyr and a maenad, from the House of Caecilius Jucundus in Pompeii,



Painting of a Bacchalan scene by Michel-Ange Houasse.

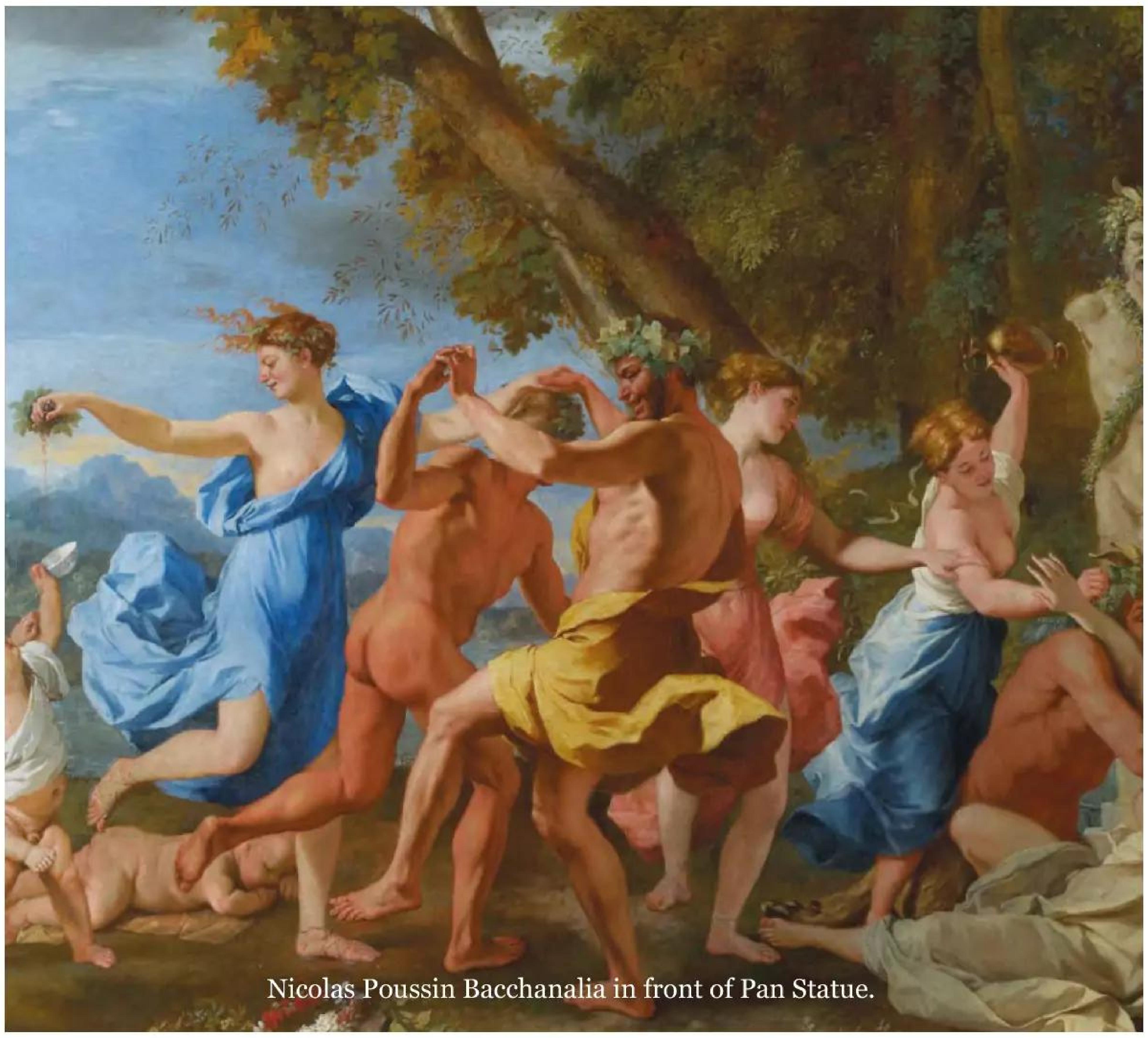
identity; a kenosis, supposed to attain a form of what Greeks referred to as theia mania, a theia stasis or divine mania of Dionysus.

Under the influence of Greek colonies and influence, the cult of Dionysus diffused into Southern Italy (Magna Graecia) and Etruria in the 4th to 3rd centuries BCE. In Italy it was admitted that Dionysus was worshiped with local wine-gods such as Liber Pater (a god of the grape harvest and plebeian freedom), facilitating its adoption. Come 200 BCE, Bacchic rituals had been thriving in a peaceful silence across multi-ethnic quarters of Rome.

Our main authority, Livy, relates that nocturnal Dionysian practice first crept into Etruria through the agency of an anonymous Greek sacerdos; thence out of Etruria into Rome as it were like a contagion. This medical language is a suggestion of how alarmed conservative Romans felt about the spread of the cult.

These Bacchanalia were at first unofficial and clandestine; they were, at first, practiced in secret groves or in secret homes, without the concurrence of the state. However, they still managed to seem well-organized and popular in central and southern Italy and they had a heterogeneous following.

In Rome, the founder, according to Livy, was a Campanian priestess, Paculla Annia, who in about 188 BCE is said to have transformed everything, as though by divine inspiration, made men the inductees of what were once women only, extended the observance to night instead of broad daylight and multiplied the number of

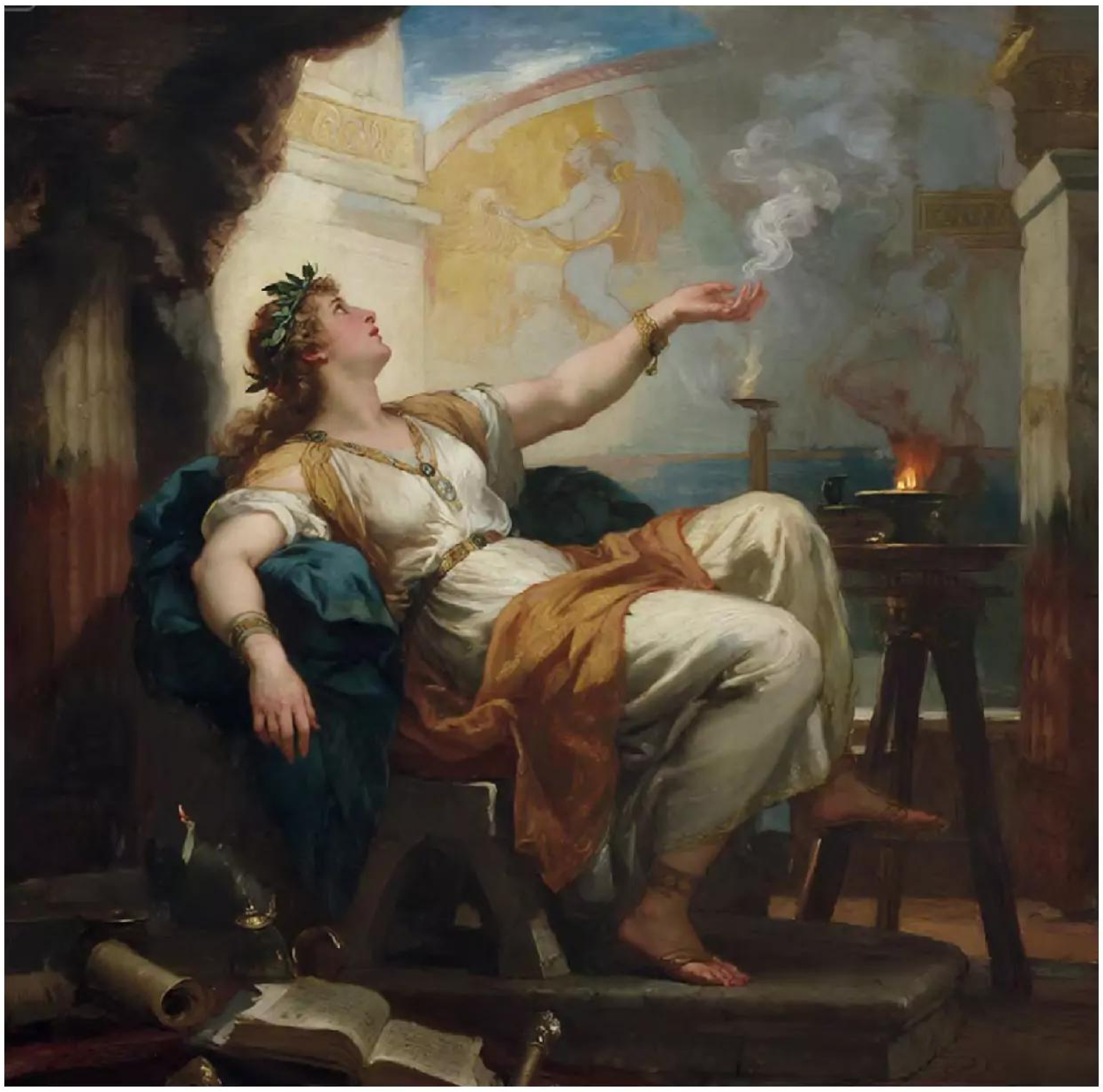


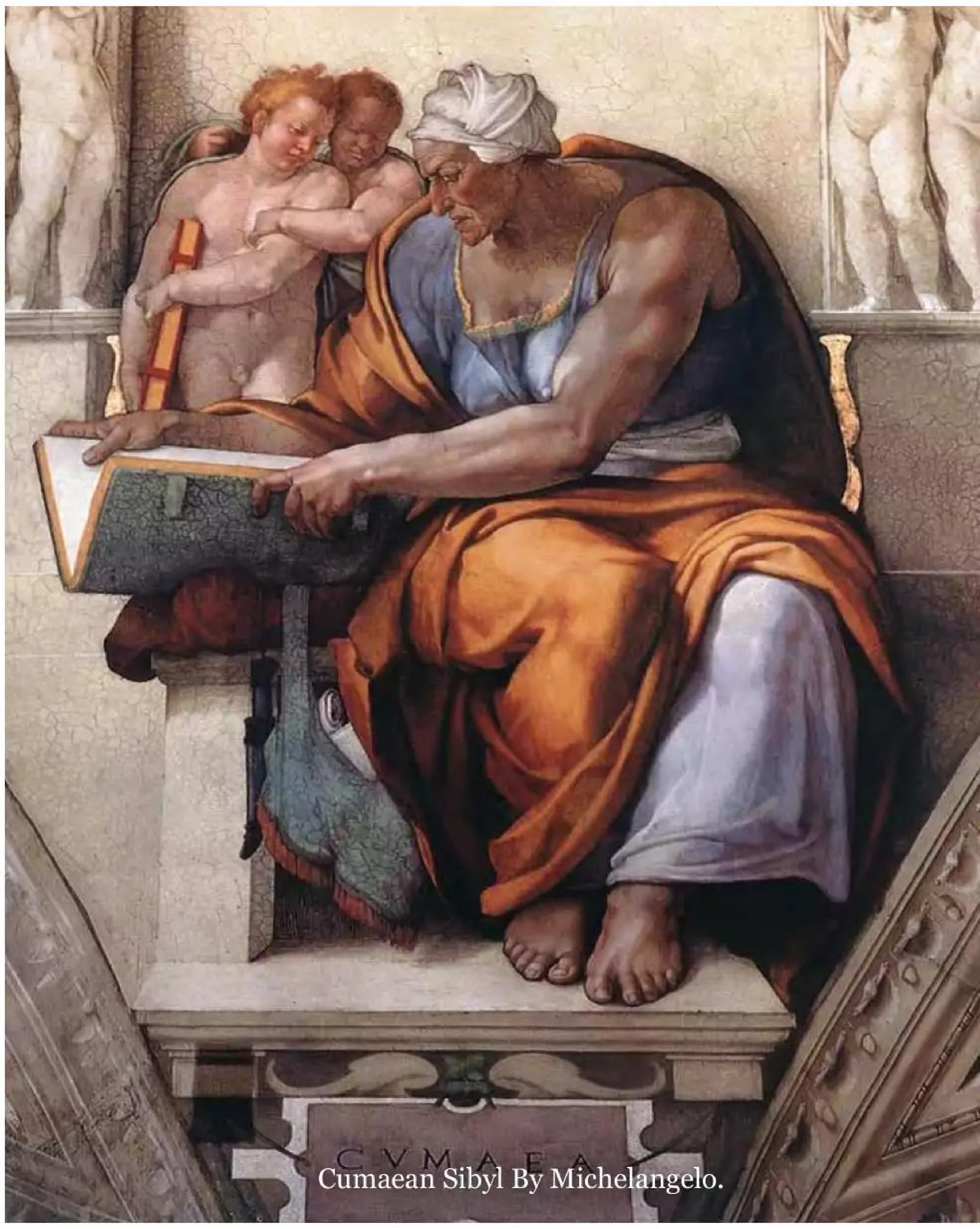
Nicolas Poussin Bacchanalia in front of Pan Statue.

Bacchantin by Ferdinand Leeke.

observances. According to the accounts of Livy, the outcome of this activity was an outpouring of engagement which traversed accepted lines of gender, age and among other classes. The indigenous cult of Liber was always conservative in comparison, but these exotic Bacchic mysteries were drunkenly novel.

In 180s BCE, the inmates of Rome were able to listen to the sounds of those secret Bacchanals at nighttime, screaming, banging of the drums and the cymbals communicating through darkness. Preceding the scandal of 186 BCE, dramatists such as Plautus joked about the closeness and extravagance of Bacchic religion foreshadow-





Cumaean Sibyl By Michelangelo.

ing that Roman society knew of these practices.
As a fact of life, cult conventions had been in existence over the years without open confrontation. But the social climate after the Second Punic War was anxious: Rome had been through years of chaos and was now vigilant against internal threats. The stage was set for a backlash once rumors turned truly scandalous.

Divine Ecstasy: Altered States in Ancient Rome

Augustus engineered the Pax A Roman sarcophagus (c. 210-220 CE) with the victorious Dionysus (Bacchus) arriving to sleepy Ariadne, one of the bacchanalian orgies. Such artwork points to the wild and ecstatic nature of his cult. In 186 BCE, Roman officials were in attendance at top-secret nocturnal meetings where drum cymbals drowned out moaning of ecstasy and fear. These were the ceremonies of the Bacchanalia, the mysterious religion of Bacchus the wine and emancipation god.

The mania that they had discovered, the Bacchanalian revels, the somnambulistic drunkenness, the whispers of murder, alarmed the Senate so much, that it acted (as usual) with great dispatch to suppress the activity of the cult. The same Republic, however, also left the destiny of a war or a battle in the hands of these mysterious verses spoken in trance.

At the rocky shore of Cumae, an old prophetess, the Cumaean Sibyl, breathed in the inspiration of the gods, and babbled in trance, sending the word of the gods to Rome. They kept her oracles, the Sibylline Books, in the capital, and in times of trouble consulted them as if the very voice of Jupiter might speak through them.

This contradiction embodies a key conflict in Roman spiritualism: the state of trances was interpreted as an ultimate source of divine insight, but also a terrible disaster to social order. The following steps on the way to a discussion of Bacchic frenzies and Sibylline frenzies are to examine how these frenzies transformed the spiritual realm of ancient Rome, both inspiring veneration and terror as well as suppression and assimilation and what any attitude toward them tells us of Rome and its values and politics.

The Bacchanalia: Ecstasy and Outrage in the Republic

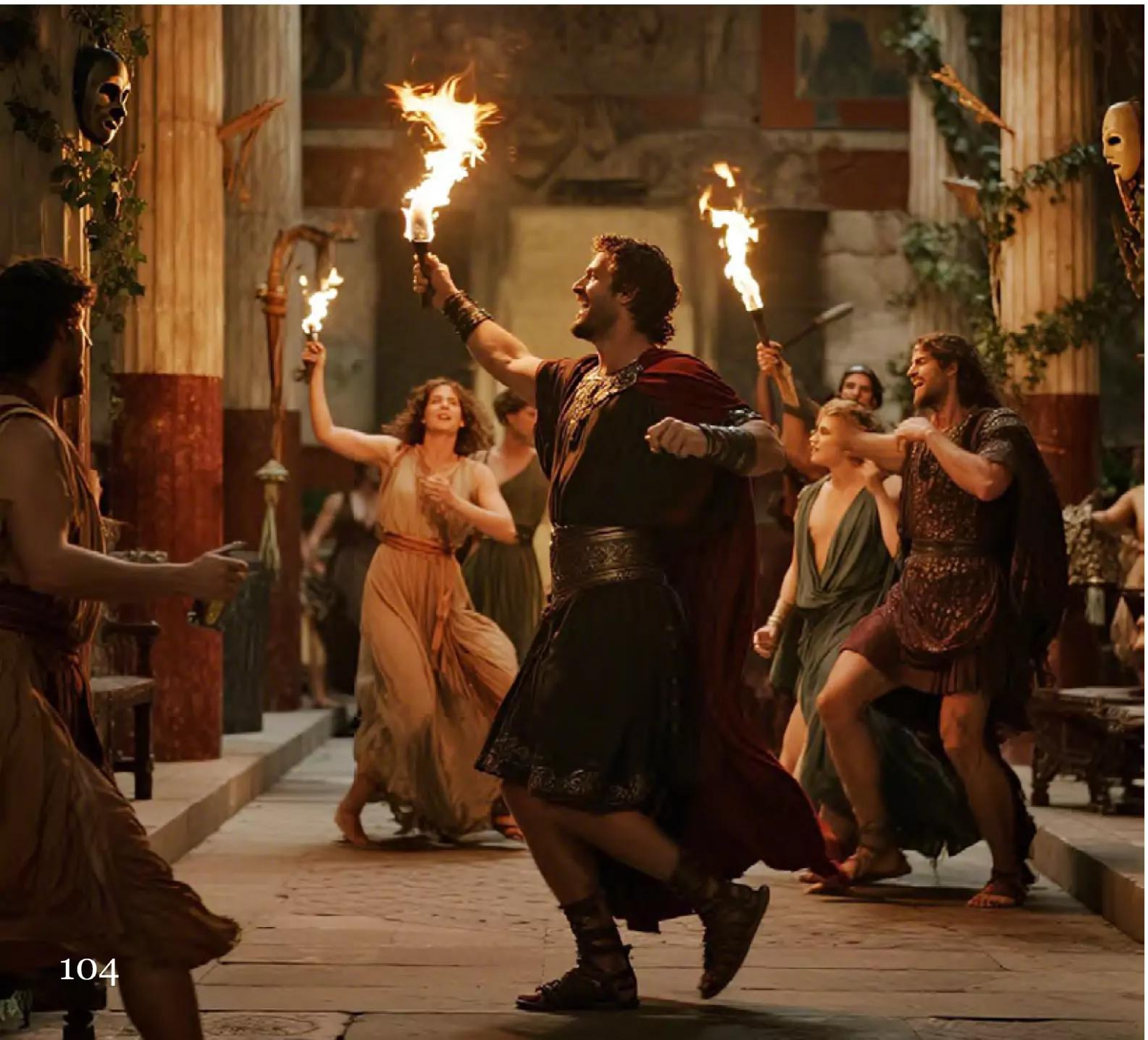
The Bacchanalia started at a modest scale but in the first half of the 2nd century BCE it had become a widespread phenomenon. Livy undertook the cult in order to exist as a small female rite to be done in the daytime a couple of times yearly, but an ambitious Greek clairvoyant brought to Etruria new night-time rituals, which quickly rolled to Rome. These night worships were open to all sexes and classes to rub shoulders in these sacred, nocturnal ceremonies imbibed in wine and with music.

The account by Livy (within which account the Bacchanalian soirees are described in all their lurid colors) was composed some 200 years later. With wine and feasting, he tells of how they tempted the participants, till, when the wine had warmed their souls, the night and confusion of men and women, of the old and those of youth, had swept away all sense of shame, that the utterly licentious went unabated in the corruptions of every kind. When social and moral restraints were lost, all was well with crime and depravity under cover of dark: wills were forged, people poisoned, and even ritual murder was accused of happening through the orgiastic dancing. The bloodshed was disguised so much that the sobbing of the small drum and the rattle of the cymbal, wrote Livy, drowned out the sound of appeal. Rituals of orgiastic raving, degenerating into a din of rape and carnage, reflect the kinds of horror experienced in Rome by the elite, when loss of control was traced within religious ecstasy.

Some young man, Publius Aebutius, struck by the warning of his lover (the courtesan Hispala) told of the cult activities to the civil governor Spurius Postumius Albinus, the consul. In 186 BCE an inquiry on what it now perceived as a huge conspiracy (coniuratio) woven into the very core of Rome was raised by the Senate.

Livy relates how Postumius 'terrified testimony of Hispala was collected' whose account of the nocturnal horrors of the Bacchanalia caused senators to be 'disturbed and fearful'. The Senate reacted very harshly. It emitted a special edict, the Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus (which was a de facto prohibition of the Bacchanalia in Italy). The decree was preserved in the form of a bronze inscription, and the rigor of its conditions attest to the scale of the panic in Rome.

Its provisions declare, it is forbidden that anyone shall have a place with him where Bacchus shall be worshipped; and that no one in a party of five or above men or women shall "transact such rites" unless special permission be granted to them by the Senate. The laws also prohibited the existence of any Bacchic clergy and held funds and



required anyone who violated the legal requirements to be executed as capital offenses.

Efforts to contain and control were, in fact, the initial response of Rome to the cult: the meetings of the cult were reduced to their lowest levels (the cults could not exceed minimal groups (i.e. no more than 5 persons), and the presence of at least two men would also be refused) and were supervised by magistrates to enforce the lesson.

The Senate commanded the decree to be affixed publicly, and read in assemblies, by which the people were threatened with execution in case of disobedience. This people-clearing was one of the first massive prosecutions of a religious cult in European history. Even the Roman repression of the Bacchanalia in 186 BCE would be, as one contemporary historian notes, the first large scale religious persecution in Europe, and establish a dark precedent of what would happen to unorthodox worship.

In the purge, classical texts suggest that thousands of cultists were captured and a good number were executed and imprisoned as the scandal progressed.

The Bacchanalian Rituals

Titus Livius recounts in detail how the Bacchanalian rituals were carried out, emphasizing that they were not public rites but private ceremonies reserved exclusively for initiated community members. Those wishing to join the cult of Bacchus were required to adhere strictly to certain rules, foremost among these being a ten-day period of sexual abstinence (castimonia) prior to initiation.

Indeed, the practice of complete sexual abstinence as a preparatory measure was common in various mystery cults. Demosthenes confirms this in a Greek context, describing how priestesses of Dionysus observed nine days of total abstinence before participating in the hierogamy—the symbolic sacred marriage to the god Dionysus. Similarly, the cult of Magna Mater (Cybele) in Rome mandated ritual chastity among its devotees.

Returning specifically to the Bacchanalia, after the mandatory ten days of chastity, initiates gathered for a communal meal, suggesting ritual fasting may also have been involved prior to this event. Following the dinner, initiates underwent a ritual bath, after which they were ceremonially guided into the sanctuary by senior initiates. A period of silence was then strictly observed, symbolizing the absolute secrecy required of all participants regarding the cult's practices and mysteries.

Subsequently, a ritual sacrifice was performed, with an offering made upon the god's altar. This act was followed by a solemn oath with notably chilling implications: initiates vowed to personally punish, even violently tear apart, anyone among them who revealed the mysteries of Bacchus to outsiders. Livy implies this through the testimony of Hispala, who expressed profound terror and urgently sought protection when compelled by Consul Spurius Postumius Albinus to disclose the secrets of the Bacchanalian sect (Livy, Ab Urbe Condita, XXXIX, 8–19).

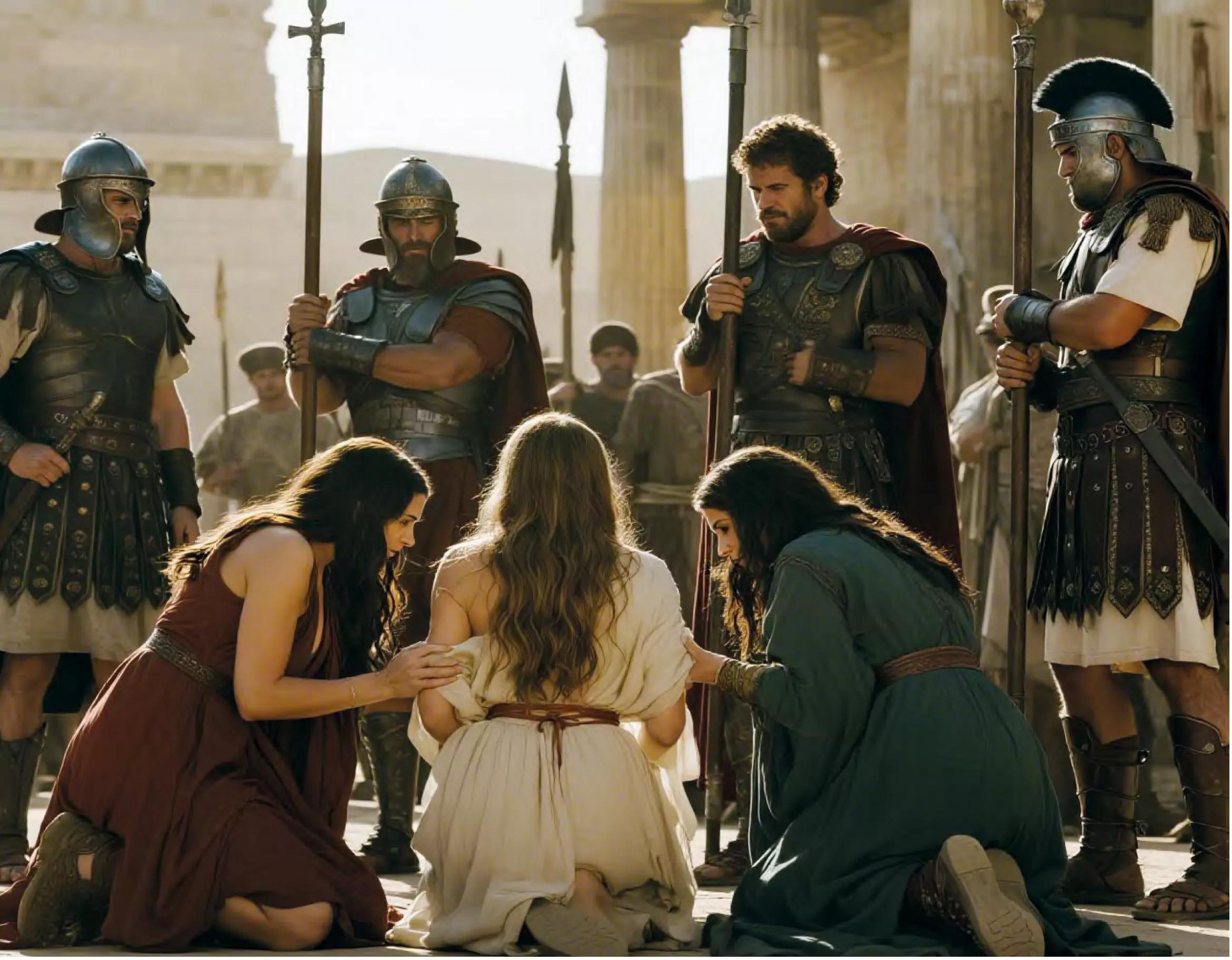
The pretext was the litany of moral and criminal charges that Livy (and likely the Senate's own propagandists) laid at the cult's feet – charges of stuprum (sexual deviance), poisoning, and treasonous plotting under cover of religion. The Senate insisted it acted because a "threat to public order and even the state" had been uncovered. Yet scholars have long debated what truly lay behind the Bacchanalia affair.

Livy wrote with evident bias – "tendentious to say the least", in the words of one analysis – portraying the Bacchants as a dire symptom of Roman degeneracy. His dramatization borrows tropes from theater (the wicked stepfather, the virtuous matron informant, etc.), suggesting that parts of the tale served as a moralizing narrative rather than strict reportage. Modern historians have proposed that the Senate's move had as much to do with politics as with morality. The 186 BCE decree as a hard-nosed act of Realpolitik: a demonstration of senatorial authority aimed at reasserting control in Italy after the social upheavals of the Second Punic War. By crushing an unsanctioned cult that cut across social boundaries, the Senate sent a clear message that no private association, however popular, would be allowed to bypass traditional Roman authority. Indeed, the ferocity of the repression – involving mass trials and executions – betrays a kind of moral panic among the Roman leadership.

Historians note that Rome's reaction to the Bacchanalia was extraordinary, with "nothing comparable in religious history" until the later persecutions of Christians in the Empire. In this sense the Bacchanalia affair foreshadowed how Rome, in more familiar episodes under the Caesars, would respond when secret cults were seen to challenge the cultural or political status quo.

In spite of the scorched-earth policy adopted by the Senate, Bacchus himself was not, and perhaps could not be, entirely driven out of Roman life. The proclamation was not an out-right outlawing of the god and his worship; instead it was meant to do away with the orgiastic and apolitical religiosity of the Bacchic underground and maintain at the same time sober forms of cult practice. It is probable that officials did realize that taken all in all, to prohibit Bacchus altogether was likely to offend a great deity. To be sure, even the decree itself made allowance that one who really had need to undertake Bacchic rites as an act of piety might apply to the Senate on specified conditions to do so.

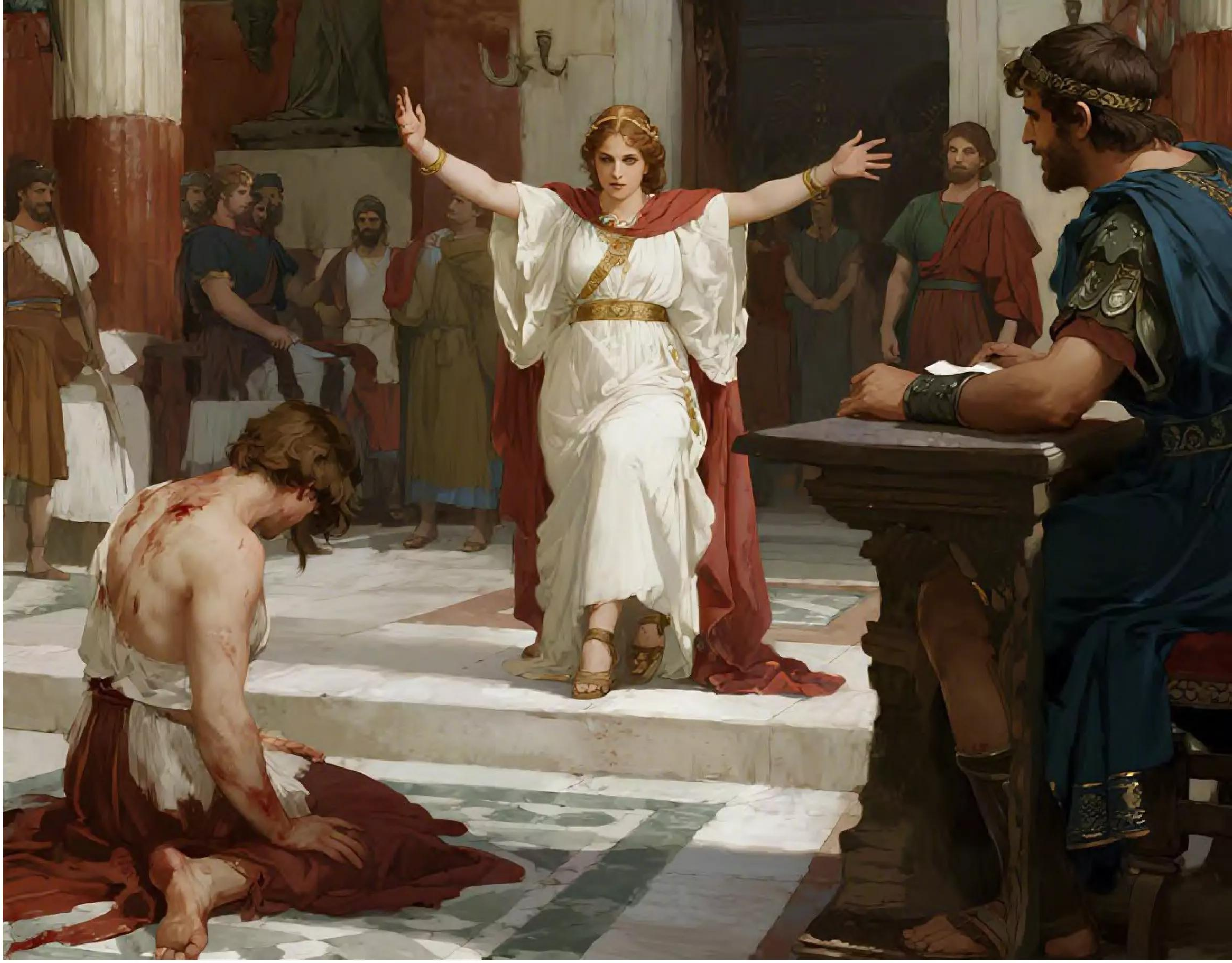
Afterwards, Bacchanals were still kept up illicitly for many years, particularly in southern Italy, where the cult had originated. With time, the wild Bacchic orgies subsided to more sane regulated versions. The cult of Liber (the Roman god commonly classed with Bacchus) was allowed to survive, but in a very different form, deprived of the scandalous element. Even the popular festival of Liber (the Liberalia) was on the eve of the wildest panic transferred and muted, and, when panic was dissipated, transferred back again. The resultant compromise was Bacchic: Bacchus was admissible, yet his headstrong ecstasy, indeed the god himself, whatever divine ecstasies he symbolized, had to be domesticated so as to conform to Roman conventions.



The Bacchanalia incident therefore comes out as a clear-cut indication of the urge to box in the irrational among the Romans. The Dionysian “divine madness” which overcame the worshippers of Bacchus was an object of dread and chains to the Roman Senate. With its crushing of the Bacchanalia, Rome reasserted its self-image of a Commonwealth of sobriety, discipline, and law, an image that the Bacchic revels had apparently thrown into question by providing a sample of wild, ecstatic freedom in which no social status or state authority was either respected or recognized.

The Sibyl’s Trance: Prophecy in the Heart of Rome

Even as the Roman Senate clamped down on Bacchanalian frenzy, it cautiously embraced another form of altered consciousness: the inspired trance of the oracular prophetess. Central to this was the legend of the Sibyl and her sacred prophecies. According to tradition, in the late monarchic period an old woman – the Cumaean Sibyl – approached King Tarquinius Superbus with nine books of prophecy, offering them at an exorbitant price. When Tarquin scoffed at the cost, the Sibyl dramatically



burned three books and offered the remaining six for the same price; again he refused, and she burned six, leaving only three scrolls – which the astonished king finally agreed to buy at the original price. Those three scrolls, so the story goes, became the Sibylline Books of Rome. Stored in the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus and guarded by a special priestly commission, these books were believed to contain divinely inspired oracles that could guide the Roman state in perilous times. Notably, the prophecies were written in Greek hexameter verse – a clue to their origin in the Greek world and to the Romans' view that the Greek language was a medium of ancient prophetic wisdom. The Sibylline

Books were not consulted lightly or casually. They were treated as a kind of last-resort repository of mystical knowledge: only at the command of the Senate, and typically in response to prodigies or national crises, would the custodial priests (originally two, later expanded to quindecimviri or "fifteen men") retrieve the scrolls from their secure vault and carefully interpret the verses for the appropriate divine remedy.

Who was the Sibyl behind these oracles? In Roman imagination, she was the prophetess of Apollo, dwelling in a cave at Cumae (in Campania, near Naples). The epic poet Virgil, writing in the Augustan age, gives a famous description of the Sibyl's trance in the Aeneid. When Aeneas meets the Sibyl, she is seized by the god's spirit: "suddenly her countenance and color were not the same, nor did her hair remain neatly bound; her breast heaved and her heart swelled with wild frenzy, and she seemed larger to behold, and her voice no longer sounded mortal – since she felt the nearer breath of deity". This vivid scene captures the essence of divine possession: the Sibyl's human self is temporarily effaced as Apollo's presence fills her, making her voice the instrument of prophecy.

In Virgil's account, the Sibyl struggles against the god's domination – "she storms wildly in the cavern, if so she may shake the mighty god from her breast" – but ultimately the oracle's words burst forth from her, echoing from the cave's hundred mouths. Such portrayals impressed upon Roman readers the awe-inspiring otherness of the Sibyl's state of consciousness. It was a voluntary madness ("numine furens" – maddened by divine will) that lent access to knowledge beyond mortal men.

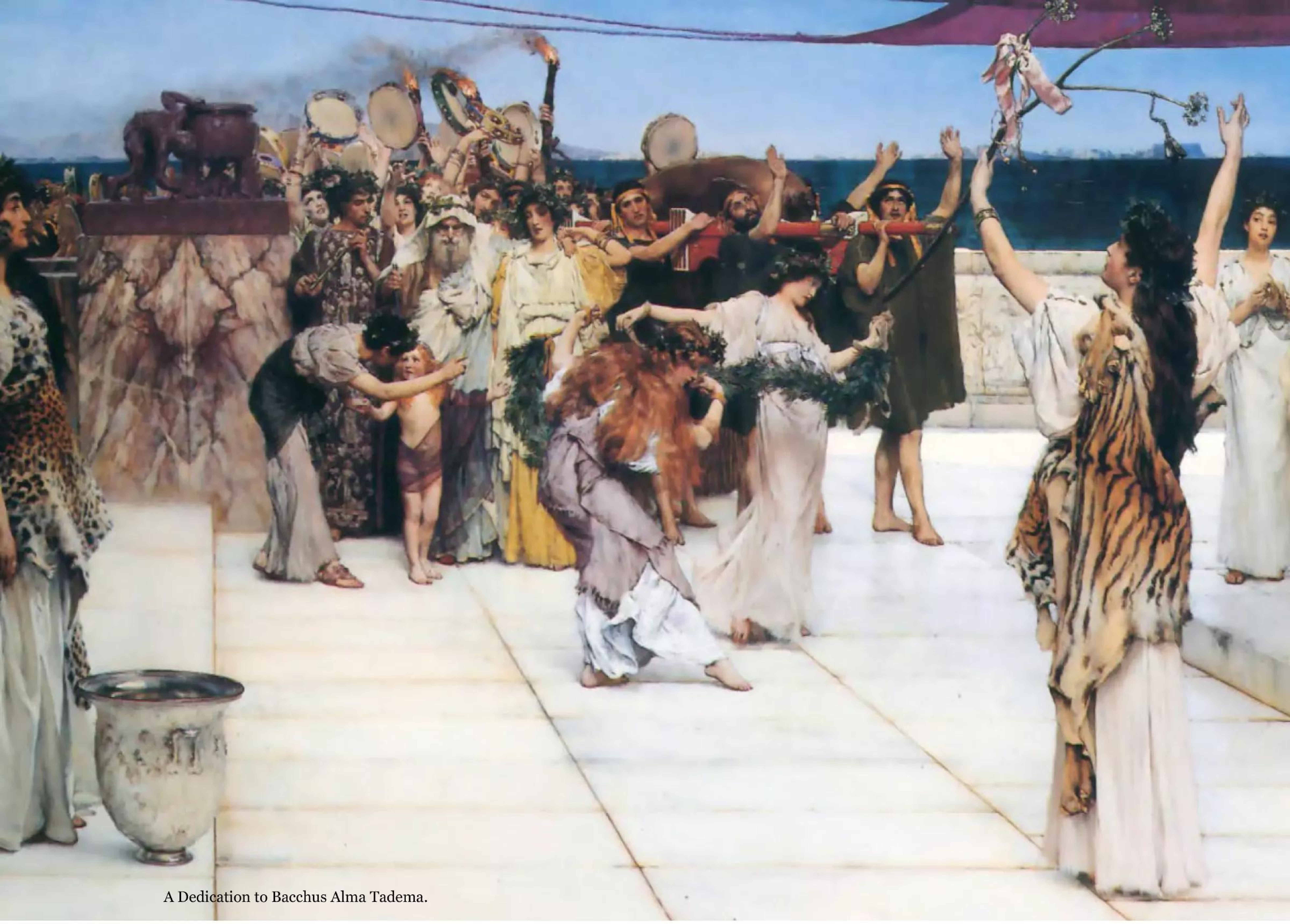
There are numerous examples of the influence of the Sibylline Books in the state policy found in Roman history. During times when Rome was not on good terms with the gods (pax deorum) i.e. during times of war, plague or prodigy, the Senate usually consulted the oracles. As an example, when the Romans suffered a disastrous defeat at Cannae in 216 BCE, when people were panicking, the Sibylline Books were turned to.

There was one prescription that has been recorded as shocking, and that was, to bury alive two Greeks and two Gauls in the Forum Boarium, as a strange sacrifice to the gods. Even with this somber advice, the Romans, never to be swayed by logic, abided with even this. The performance of the rite, though against every custom of their religion, they hoped in order to discharge divine wrath.

Several years later, and during the same Punic war, a better remedy was supplied by the Sibylline verses. The Books themselves suddenly grasped the attention of the Romans in 205 BCE, when they were still threatened by Hannibal. A prophecy of them ran as follows: Whenever there comes a foreign enemy to invade Italy, he can be chased off and pacified, when the Mother of the Idaeans (Magna Mater) is brought out of Pessinus into Rome.

The Idaean Mother was the Asia Minor Mother Goddess Cybele. The Senate, in accordance with this oracle, sent envoys to the East to procure the sacred black stone representing the goddess. King Attalus of Pergamum negotiated the move and in 204 BCE the Great Mother of Phrygia arrived at Rome. Livy relates how the meteoric stone, which was the image of the goddess, was brought in a ship up the Tiber, met at Ostia by the noble matrons of Rome, and was placed with a splendid effort in a temple on the Palatine Hill with feasts and games. So, at the bidding of an oracle came this remarkable event in the history of Roman religion - the importation of a foreign god, an Asian deity. It indicated that leaders of Rome were ready to include new gods and rituals in the state cult when the Sibylline prophecies dictated them, even in the case when they did not belong to the original Italian tradition.

The Sibylline Books would be credited with inspiring the arrival of other gods even over the centuries as well (an instance of which would be when a plague forced the arrival of the healing deity Aesculapius in 293 BCE, who was brought into Greece after some oracular advice was followed). Through this, the trance born prophecies dynamically



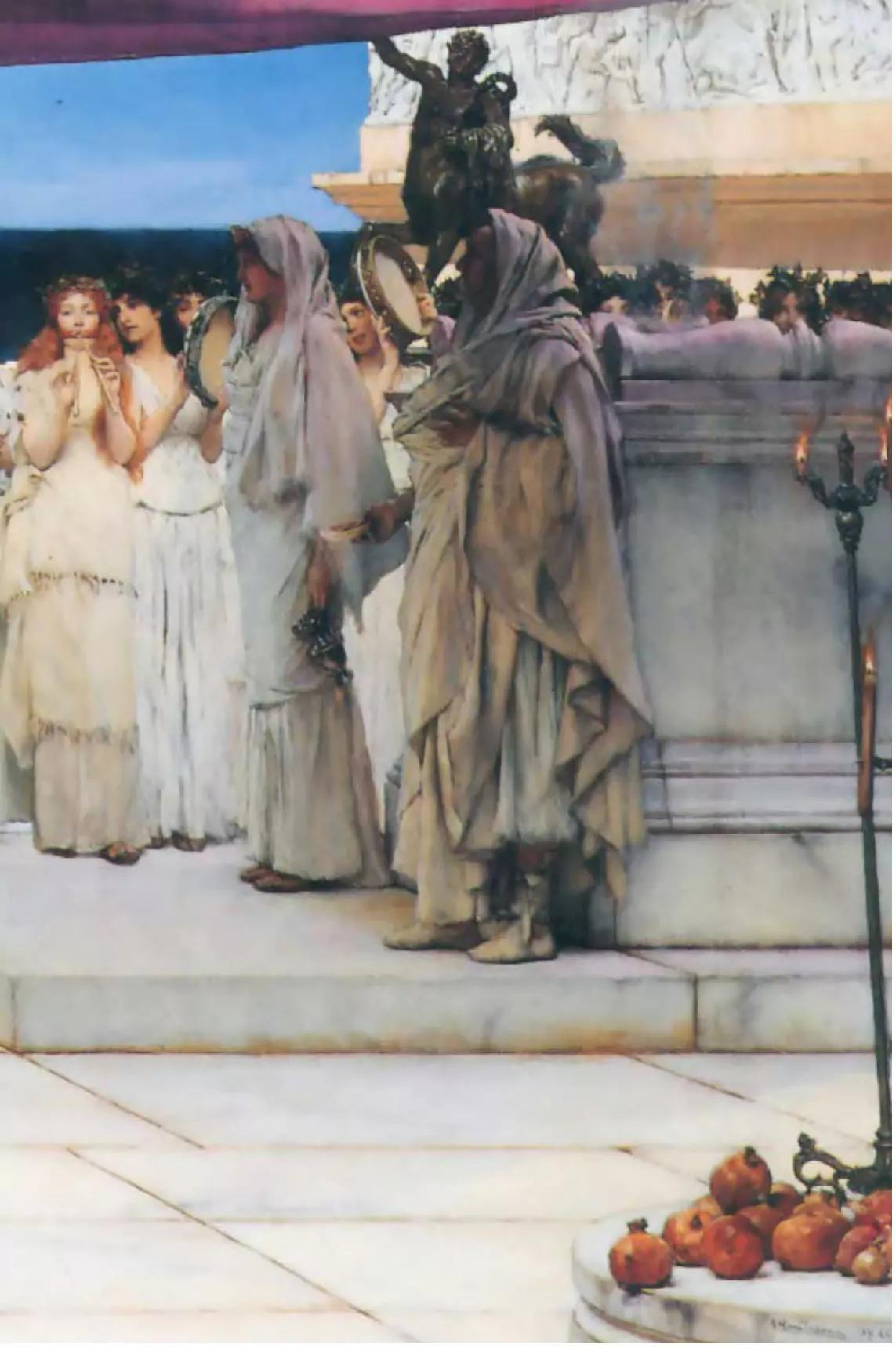
A Dedication to Bacchus Alma Tadema.

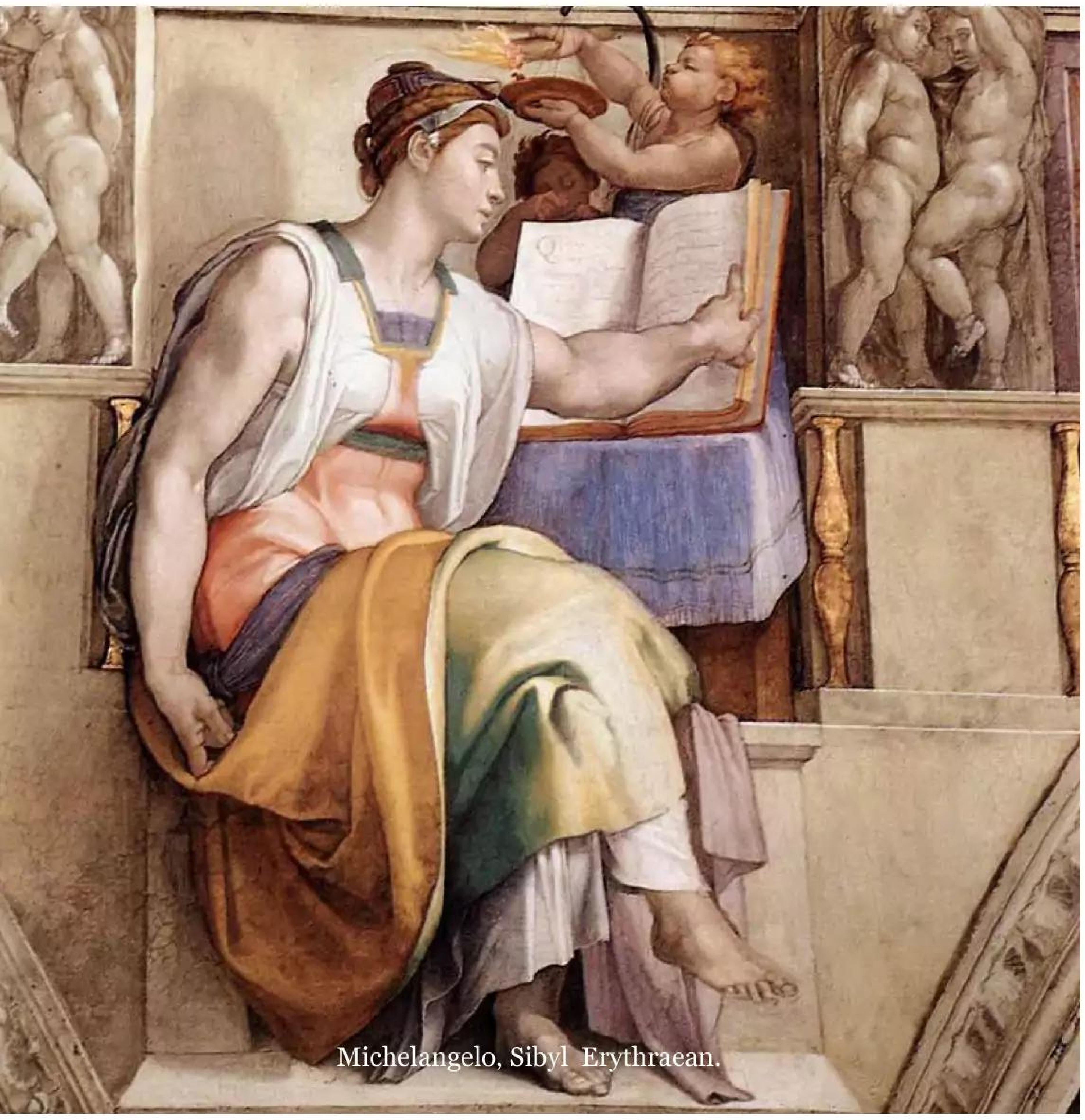
fluenced the Roman policy of religion itself and even the architectural aspect of the city since new temples were erected to serve their instructions. But the Romans never were blind in their attitude toward these oracles - it was rather a reverent, and at the same time a healthy caution.

On the one hand the Sibylline Books were regarded with the greatest veneration; and Cicero describes how, in his day, no Roman, at least, would ever have ventured to say that he despised the oracles of the Sibylline and of the Haruspices, when they had been so many times fulfilled. This is emphasized by the desire expressed by the senate to submit to the powerful but obscure advice (when it dealt with sacrificing exotic victims or extravagant outlay of money to have a goddess transferred). This goes to show the esteem that the senate held to this form of divine guidance.

Conversely, it is because of the intensity of prophetic trances, that the state was especially strict in regulating it. The Sibylline Books remained under strict control, and could only be opened, on senatorial command, by priests of known authority. No one was allowed to replicate or publish their material under law, with a sentence of death.

We remember that, in some matters, unauthorized prophecies occasioned politico-irreligious disturbance. By eliminating a “host of dubious prophetic oracles” and centralizing the authentic ones, he ensured that no prophecy could circulate without state oversight. The Sibylline Books thus remained an official, institutionalized channel for divine ecstasy – one safely confined within the structures of Roman religion. Other free-floating seers or private prophets were viewed with suspicion. (Indeed, in later centuries the Emperor Tiberius and eventually Stilicho in 405 CE would again destroy oracles that were being used politically.) The message was consistent: prophetic trances were acceptable only on Rome’s terms. The same Romans who listened raptly to the Sibyl’s ravings also knew to curb the influence of prophecy lest it unsettle the established order.





Michelangelo, Sibyl Erythraean.

Fear, Control, and Reverence: Society's Response to Ecstasy

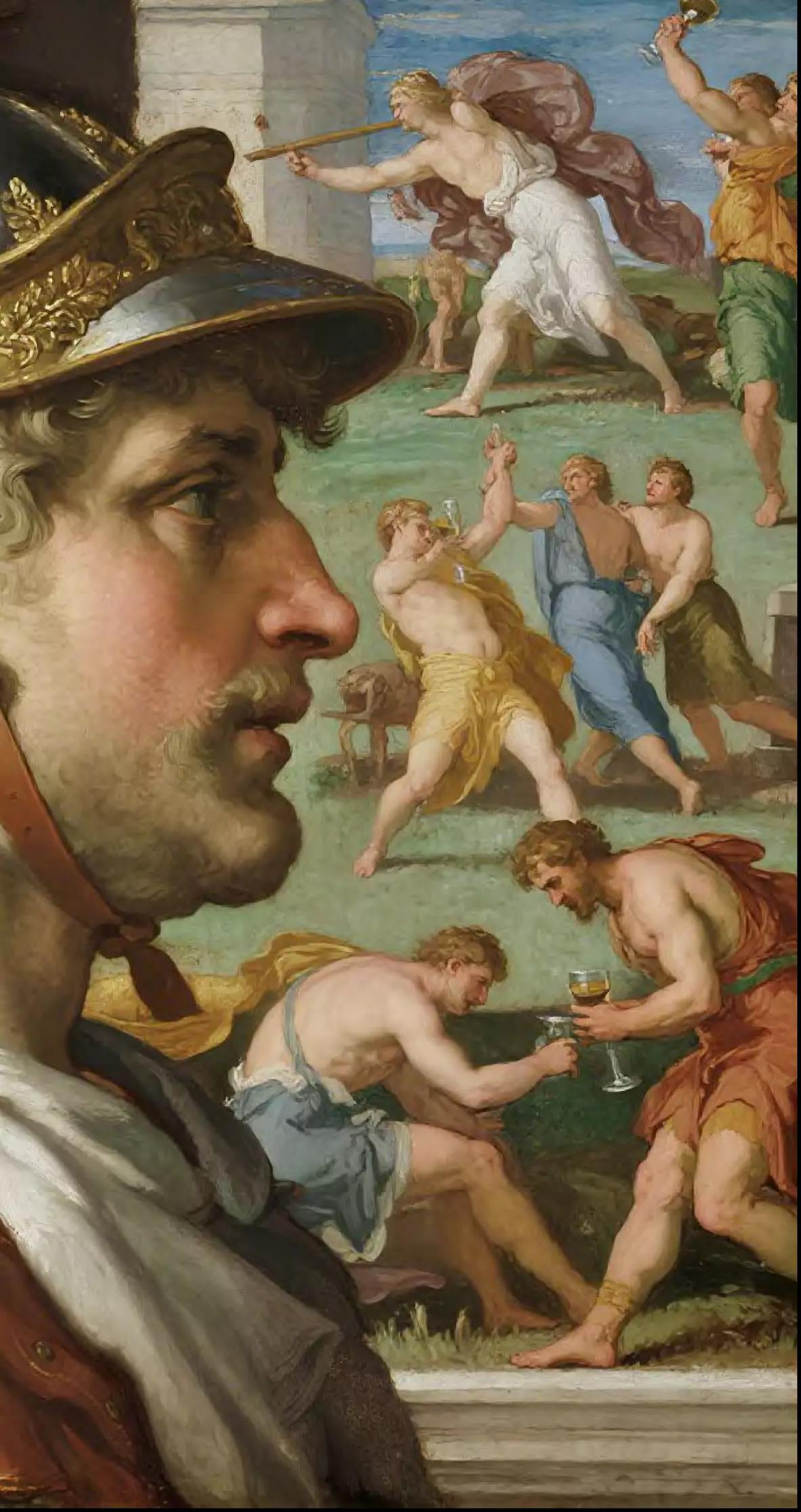
Whether it is the Bacchanalia or the Sibylline prophecies, a pattern is found in Rome regarding the reaction to altered states of consciousness: a mixture of fear and fascination, to suppression, or to strategic appropriation. The Bacchic cult evoked horror among the Roman establishment since they perceived the sacred rites as a lawless, uncontrolled effusion into every corner of life – a communal mania that smashed the established social order, swirled sexes and classes into nighttime orgies, and promoted a form of moral license that Roman authority feared as a behavior disorder. This panic can be felt in the wording of Livy (who explains that the evil of Bacchus is a plague which spreads like a deadly contagion) and in its harsh reaction by the Senate. The ecstasy of the Bacchanalia, in their opinion, was not only dangerous to personal virtue, but to the existence of the Republic.

The trance of the Sibyl on the contrary was terrible in an opposite sense: the voice of a god, sometimes of ominous tidings, sometimes requiring hard sacrifices, a thing that was liable to give rise to panic unless closely circumscribed by rite. Roman leaders revered Sibylline oracles but were also aware of what scandals may happen should it fall into the hands of the wrong people or arouse the masses. When a prophecy declares that a new king may be coming, it could topple the governments. So, with either the licentious Bacchantes, or the possessed Sibyl, Roman instinct was to master the vehicles of the supernatural.

The solution to the case of the Bacchanalia would be the immediate ban and sanctioning of anyone and everyone who engaged in that activity, it was a crass and efficient way of shooting the source of the perceived threat down at an immediate level.

An inscriptions notes the decision, which resulted in final dissolution of the Bacchanalian cult community, as its representatives feared the threat of breach of the public order and state itself.

In the case of the Sibyl, domination was not the elimination but an institutionalization. Rome domesticized the Sibyls prophetic trances: channeled through a college of priests, stored in state vaults and consulted on request at the Senate. By incorporating the ecstatic knowledge of the Sibyl into official religion, Romans were able to harvest the advantages of divine guidance without having to give away influence to charismatic prophets beyond their grasp. The fact



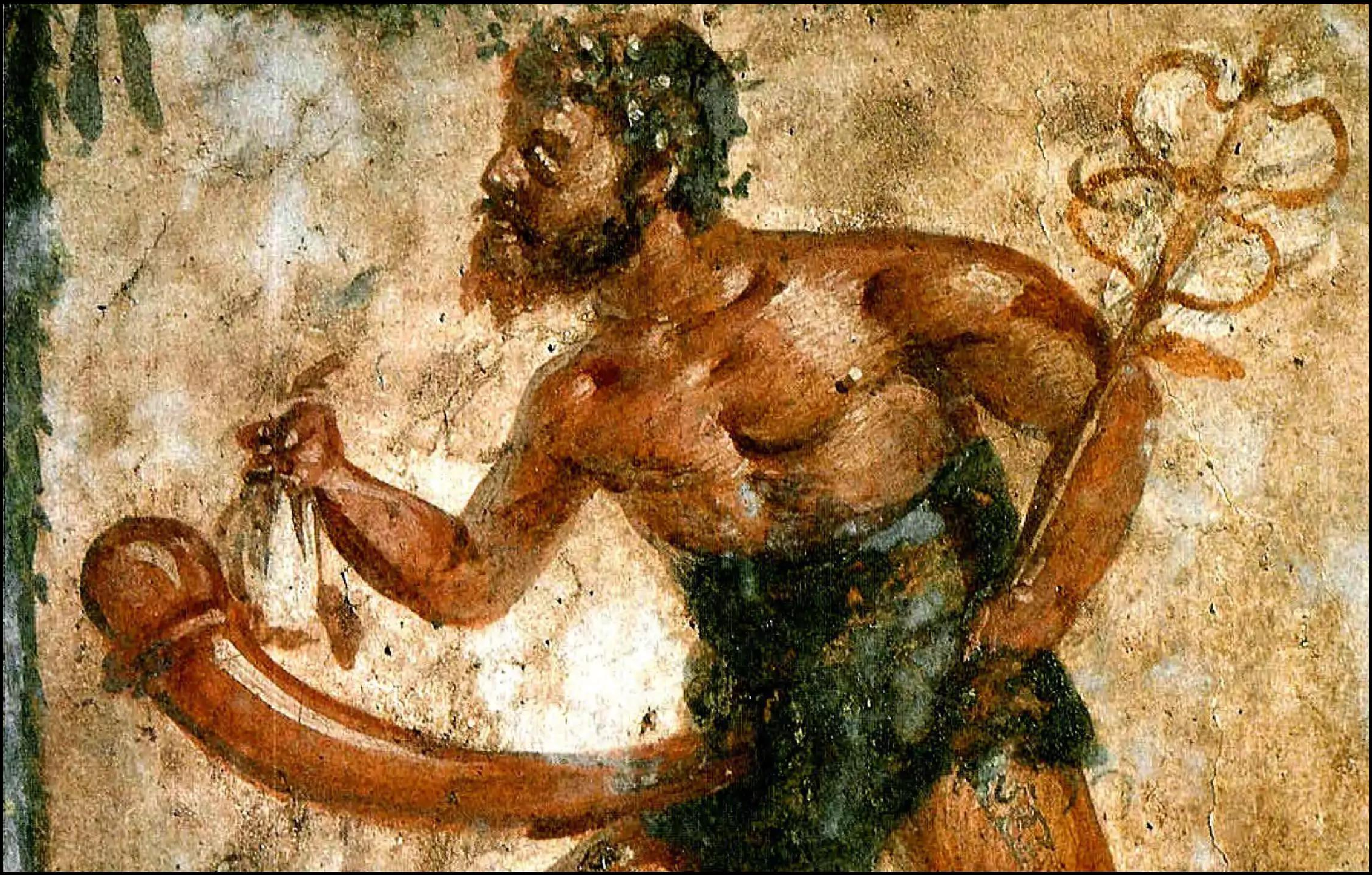
that after establishing his reign, Augustus went out of his way to literally close and archive the sources of prophecy in the city is quite telling.

Similarly the Sibylline Books had been so jealously guarded by former Republican rulers that at no time had they been read aloud to the popular ear, not even a summary, under restraint, had until then been permitted to the priests. The Bacchic and the Sibylline instances are similar in that in both cases Roman authorities are depicted performing the role of gatekeepers between the people and the ecstatic, irrational dimension of religion. But among fear and control, actual reverence and integration existed. The Romans were not cynics who did not believe in the ecstatic state of religion, because to them, the forces of god were very real and that is why they feared it in the first place. However, that is provided that once tamed, these modified conditions could be turned into the mainstays of Roman spirituality.

As an example, the Sibylline oracles dominated deeply inside the religious structure of the nation. The Senate used them to support significant state decisions, such as taking on new gods and conduction of extraordinary rituals, and, therefore, became a reliable tool of the Senate religious policy. Even the Bacchic cult, up to 186 BCE had not been completely wiped out but instead revived in mitigated form. The Liberalia festival subsequently took place again, and Bacchus was still worshipped (especially in the country, and subsequently in the Empire, on the walls of the villas and the sarcophagi), but the maniacal nocturnal dances were clipped.

It could be argued that the Roman game plan was to assimilate the celestial under Roman conditions.

The divine ecstasy in Ancient Rome was bifurcated: It created a spiritual exaltation and bonding act but could also become a factor of disorder and degradability. Events like the Bacchanalia and the Sibylline prophecies gave the Roman framework for balancing this tricky aspect. On the one hand, the altered state of Bacchic ecstasy gave ordinary Romans (especially the disaffected or socially marginalized) an inkling of a very alluring freedom, an interface with Bacchus through wine, dance, and the loosening of inhibition. This much-wanted satisfaction fulfilled an emotional need, and in some way, it was a popular mystery religion promising joy and suppression, ecstasy, and maybe even some redemption from the ironclad cementing in the structure of Roman everyday life.



Once existing private ecstasies were felt to encroach on public order, however, between the squealing and scratching of ink to paper - dual spilling of blood and ink - the reaction was fast and unforgiving. The Republic's guardians chose to spill blood and ink, executing devotees and engraving laws on bronze to ensure that no mystic frenzy would one day challenge the supremacy of the Senate or the sanctity of Roman tradition. On the other hand, the Sibylline altered state, the raging prophetess in the cave, would become entwined with the destiny of the Republic itself.

The Roman state learned to harness that ecstasy, bending it to the will whereby policies were made. To that end, by kidnapping the less rational trances of the Sibyl, Rome very adroitly made a place for heavenly madness within its rather logical civic religion. Ultimately, the story of divine ecstasy in ancient Rome is a story of balance: the attempt to reconcile Dionysian rapture with Apollonian control, to permit the soul to dance with the gods – but only in step with the Roman drum. The push and pull between fear and reverence for altered states shaped not only Roman religion, but the very fate of the Republic and Empire, as they sought the wisdom of ecstasy without succumbing to its chaos. ■

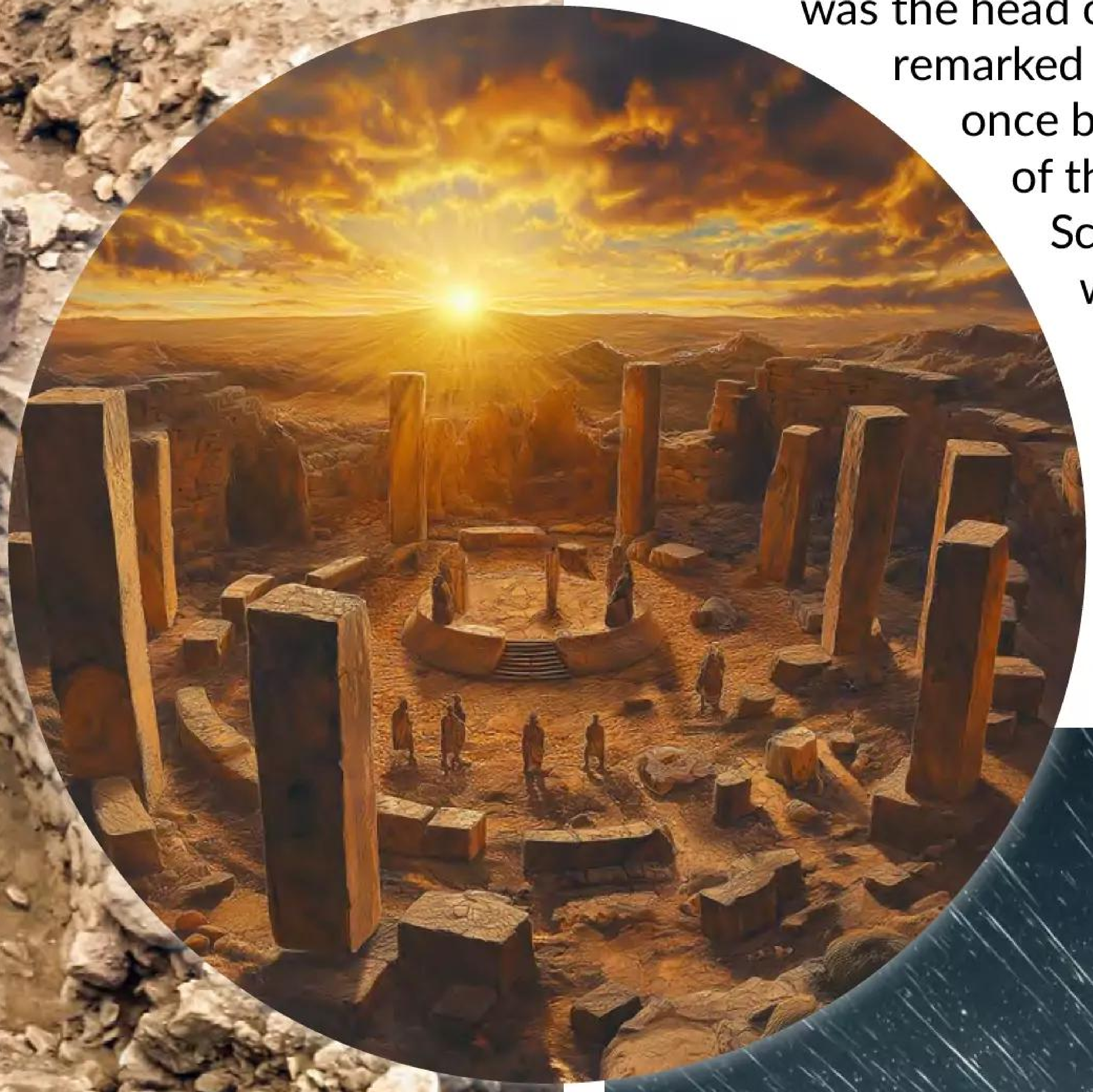
Göbekli Tepe

Shamans and their Cosmic Symbols

BY ÖZGÜR ETLI

senerdagasan1 / AdobeStock

Göbekli Tepe is an ancient and significant site which has been pushing back the beginnings of civilization further than we previously assumed. As each temple, pillar, and engraving at the Neolithic site is excavated, the story of human history is rewritten, and the symbols and messages of prehistoric cultures are revealed.As it is understood from previous research, Göbekli Tepe was utilized as a ritual center under the control of the Neolithic shamans. Klaus Schmidt, who was the head of excavations clearly remarked that Göbekli Tepe had once been the ritual center of the region. According to Schmidt, shamanic rituals were carried out in Göbekli Tepe temples, located in today's Southern Turkey. Some researchers like Andrew Collins also mention the possible shamanism



in Göbekli Tepe with regard to astronomy and cosmology. He approaches the subject in terms of pole star belief which we know from shamanism. Pole star is the creation point of all the universe, according to certain shamans. Today in Asia, Turkish, Mongolian and Tungus shamans still believe that the sky-god Tengri Ülgen ascends the throne on the pole star, Polaris. In my opinion, Göbekli Tepe was not only the ritual center of shamans, but also the initiation center of pupil shamans. When Pillar-2 is examined closely, we clearly see the bent legs of the crane. On this basis, Schmidt explains that the body of this bird may represent the human being who transforms into the crane form. Later, Schmidt suggests that this phenomenon is related to the shamanism concept. Power animals are known as the protector souls of the shaman. In the eyes of shamans, all animals are the elements of shamanic practice. The soul protects the shaman from diseases and malignancies. The shaman who gains that soul no longer cures the illnesses and prophesizes. Power animals are an “alter ego” of the shaman. Shamans imitate his or her power animal and coalesce with them during the ritual. Shamans ascend to the sky – and vice versa on land - with power animals, as they are fellow travelers. Siberian shamans have power animals like the bear, wolf, rabbit and owl; Yakut shamans have mostly bull, eagle and bear. The aforenamed animals are quite similar to the animals found carved on Göbekli Tepe pillars.

Maybe these animals would have been celestial constellations in the future. In addition, a totem pole was discovered in Göbekli Tepe which we can connect with shamanism. Totemism is based on the belief of a connection between human and animals.

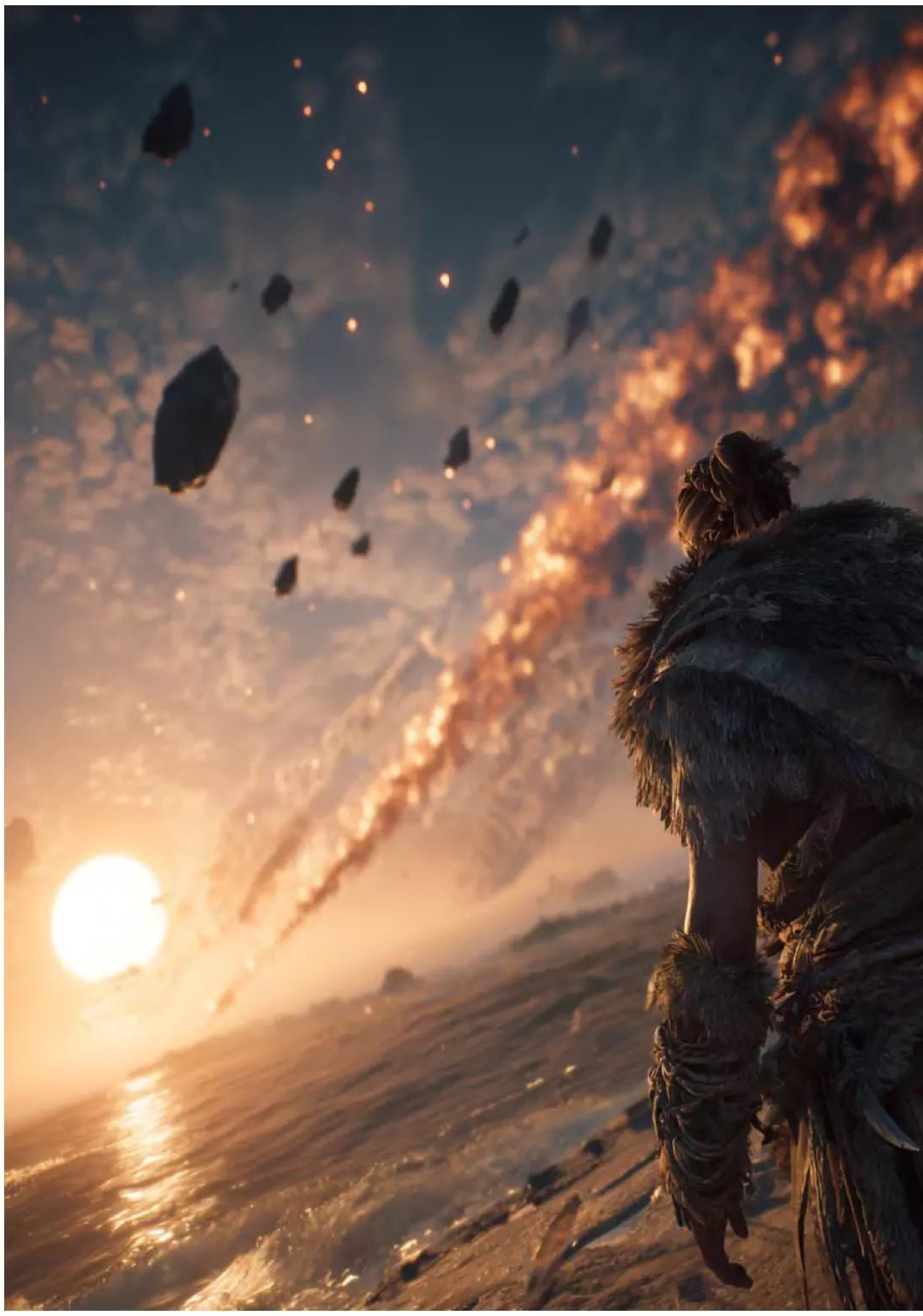
Shamanic Observatory

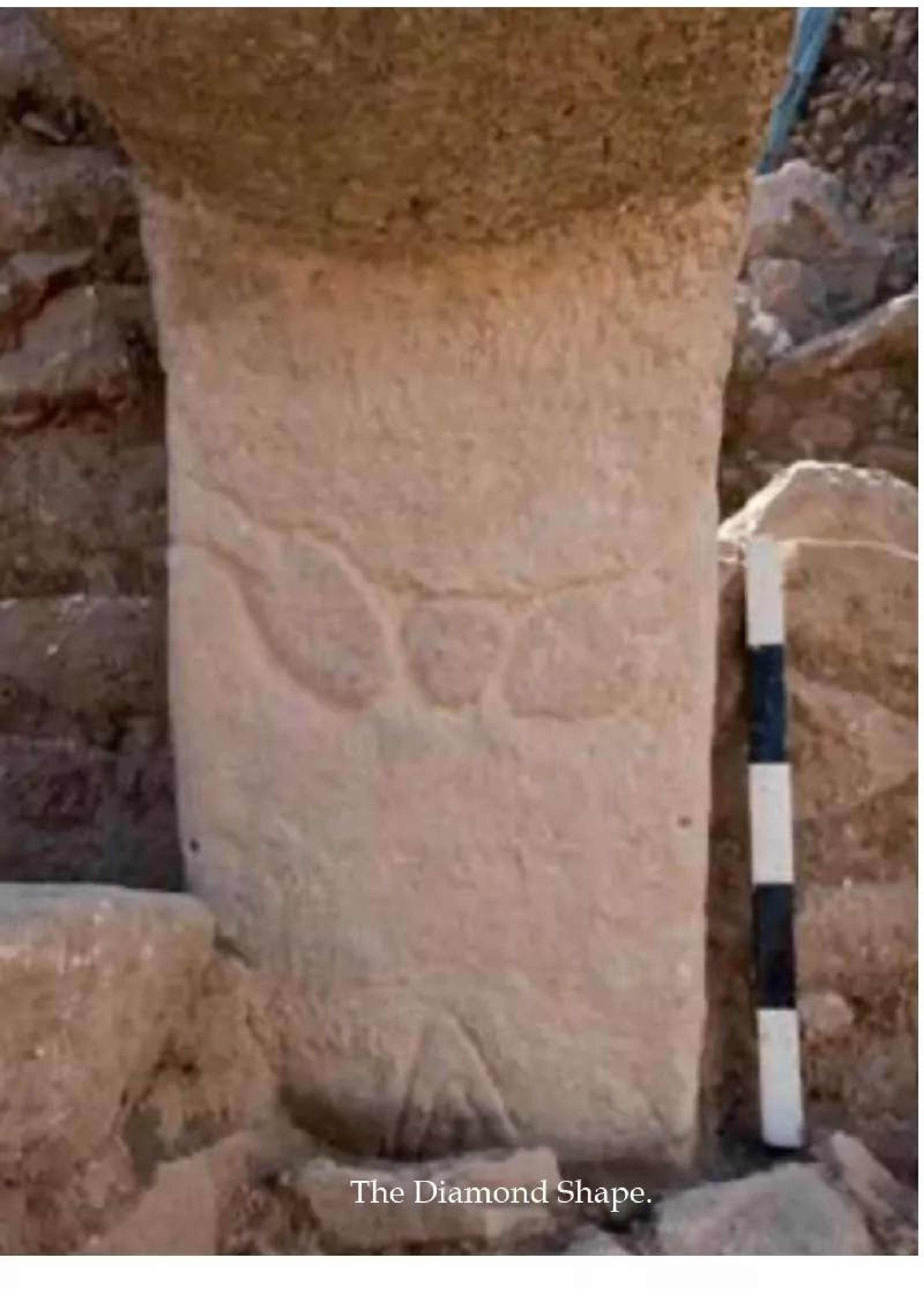
So, can we imagine that the symbols of Göbekli Tepe might have once been the symbols of shamans that were relevant to astronomy or cosmology. So, was Göbekli Tepe an ancient observatory for shamans?

Some scientists (B.G. Sidharth, Giuglio Magli and A. De Lorenzis) and researchers (Joe Plegge, Andrew Collins) specify that Göbekli Tepe was used as a celestial observatory. I am asserting that Enclosure B of Göbekli Tepe was a kind of “medicine wheel” through which one can observe the birth of substantial stars or constellations. Medicine wheels are circular stone patterns that allow us to observe astronomical objects. These sites seem to have been created with spiritual, ceremonial, and astronomical significance. Some sites are ancient, having been dated as more than 4,500 years old. In 1997, an astronomer named John Eddy from the High Altitude Observatory proposed that some of the wheels had astronomical alignments. Dr. Eddy suggested that some wheels had spokes pointing to certain stars at certain times of the year, and marked specific days of the year like solstices.

Symbolic Architecture

Göbekli Tepe pillars mainly have T-shaped forms. In New Mexico, one of the Hopi temples also has T-shaped windows, so-called Tau. As well, the Palenque Temple of the Maya also has Tau-shaped windows. Besides these, the Hopi earth-god named Masau’u has the shape of Tau. In Native American cultures, Tau symbolizes





The Diamond Shape.

earth-bound spirits. As we can see, some of the petroglyphs of Native Americans drawn as Tau, emblematizes spiritual passageways. The "Tree of Life" represents as Tau in these cultures.

There are two central pillars in Göbekli Tepe temples. There is a question regarding if we define these two pillars as "The Dual Divinity," in that they should be the "celestial parents" and "male and female principles" as well. In my opinion they were for the high-priests or head-shamans of Göbekli Tepe temples. In Sumerian mythology, sun god Utu stands between two columns which symbolize a gate; and the symbols are the sky and the earth. In Greek Mythology, the two pillars of Hercules guard the passage towards the unknown.

Beside animal motifs we see various mysterious symbols on the pillars of Göbekli Tepe temples. A "diamond-like" symbol, "H-like" and "I-like" symbol, a "three-baskets" symbol, and the "seven birds" symbol.

It is interesting to see the "diamond-like" symbol in Göbekli Tepe. It is a new finding, having been discovered on Enclosure H pillar more recently. This sign very much resembles the "medicine man" symbol of Native Americans. A medicine man, or shaman, was believed to have magical powers

of spiritual healing and foresight into the future. The outer lines of the symbol represent the four corners of the universe of the physical world: North, South, East and West. The inner lines represent the spirit world which the medicine man had knowledge of. The center circle represents the eye of the medicine man and his spiritual vision.

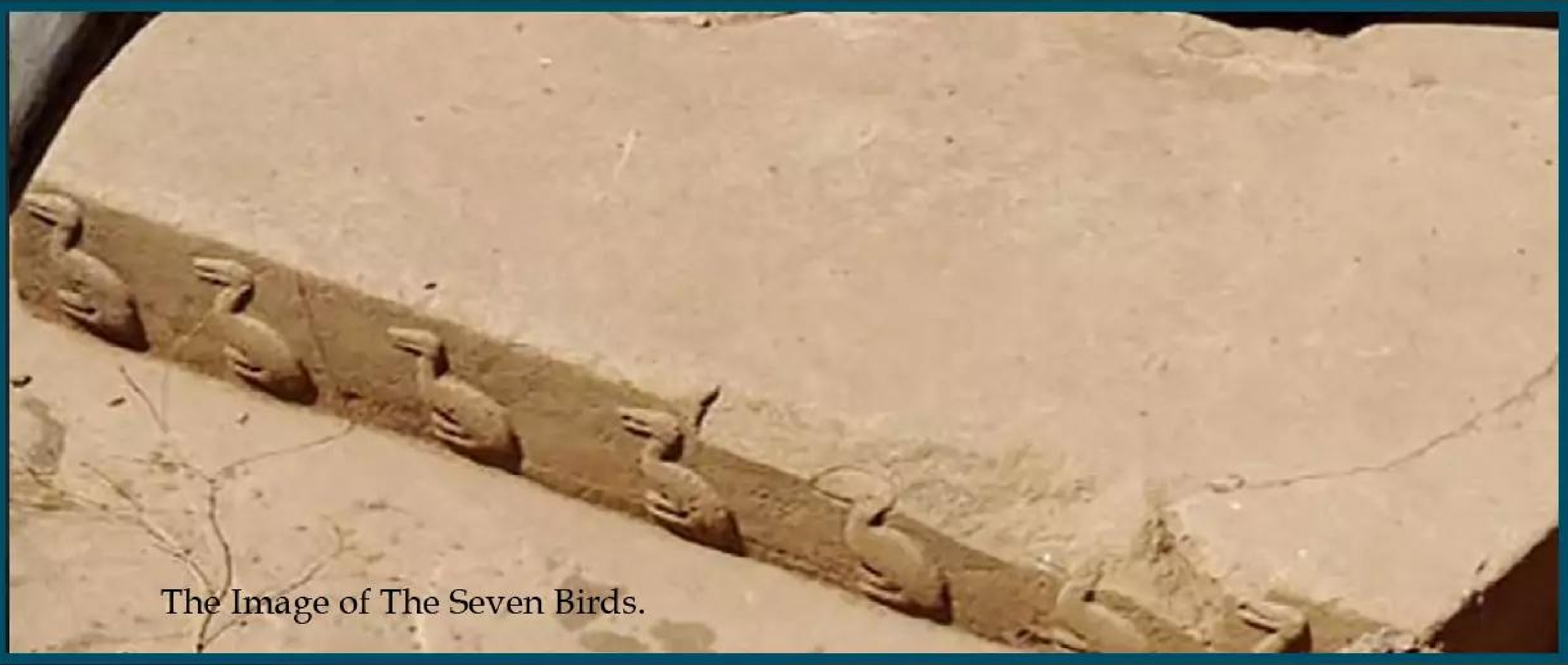
As can be seen, the medicine man symbol of shamans is present on Göbekli Tepe pillars. Right above this sign, one can see two snakes, and between them, an egg. Maybe this scene expresses the cosmic egg (or sun disc) and its guardians. In Hindu cosmology, the egg is the source of the universe we are living

in. Maybe the two snakes represent the energies of the universe or the light of the sun. Rebirth of a shaman might have been portrayed in this scene. I think this is one of the direct evidences of the shamanic presence in the Göbekli Tepe ritual center.

The Seven Birds

Again in Enclosure D we see the "seven birds" symbol. The number seven can be evaluated as the sign of "Celestial Harmony". According to Pueblo Natives, it symbolizes the Cosmic Harmony of the human being. Dogons consider the number seven as the symbol of the opposites, of the resolution of dualism, therefore a symbol of unicity and perfection. For Egyptians, it symbolizes the complete cycle, a dynamic perfection also representing eternal life. In Egyptian beliefs the sun god possessed seven spirits. In Turkish shamanism the earth-mountain is consisted of seven layers. The seven branches of the sacrificial and cosmic tree of shamanism is also another element. In astronomical thinking, seven birds can symbolize the seven stars of Big Dipper of the North (seven birds on the lower base of Pillar-18 look toward a north-south direction).

We should think also of the seven visible planets that can be seen from earth with the naked eye: Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. I believe that the "seven birds" symbolize one or more of these mysterious concepts. ■



The Image of The Seven Birds.

MAYA SHAMAN'S LIGHT AND DARKNESS WORLDS

BY GEORGES FERY

The word 'shaman' for most people, carries an aura of mystery and perplexity. Yet, it is a spiritual practice that began with early human societies. For people unfamiliar with, at times, perplexing practices, shamanism is often veiled in an obscure and foreign domain. Contemporary respected priest-shamans *Tat* Rigoberto, *Tat* Antolin and *Tat* Nicolasa, from Momostenango in the highlands of Guatemala, explore the ancient origins of this domain and lift its veil of mystery. The qualifier *Tat* is affectionately granted to highly respected lifetime priest-shamans in Maya-*K'iche'* and *Tzutu'jil* communities, the bearers of rituals that may affect their people's well-being and economic security.

The study of ancient religious practices reveals common attributes in terms of beliefs and other fundamentals. Most rituals, ancient and historic, affirm the mythical existence of another “side” of life at the end of our days, as mythical as that “other side” may be. The fundamentals of shamanism rest on the nature-culture dichotomy, a duality correlated with the “field of opposites” in literature. Shamanic rituals are found in traditional communities throughout the world, but we will focus here on those of the Mayas in Guatemala’s highlands.

Ring Of Fire

Let us first briefly look back in time, when humankind, over 100,000 years before present (BP), had to compete for survival with the claws, teeth, speed and power of the animal world. Humans’ defenses were restricted to a

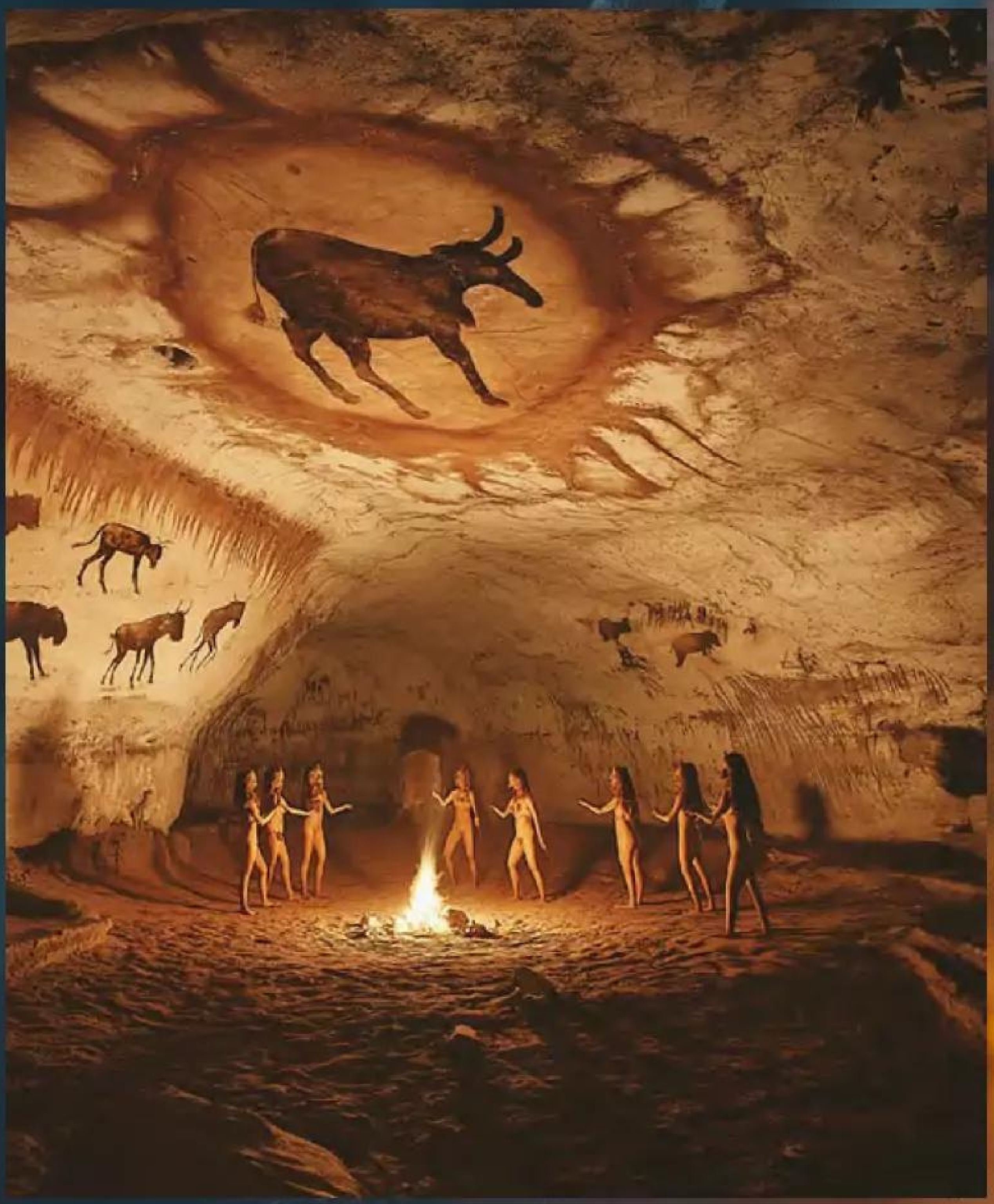
powerful brain and the nascent kinship of peers. For the sake of survival, cooperation was crucial, especially for the protection of mothers and infants for, during the last months of pregnancy and after delivery, females could not fend for themselves. Millions of generations ago, the ring of fire was the first awakening of hunter-gatherers to a world beyond their awareness. In the dark of night, the fire lit a circle beyond which everything was threatening.

Overcoming the fear of a different world, paid for dearly through trial and error, was the task of select people that mastered the nature-culture duality. The awakening to a spiritual world was grounded in the unshakable conviction that a group's spatial location is what stood it apart and affirmed its uniqueness to the exclusion of others. At first, the binary spiritual world was identified through daily repetition of natural events such as day-night. Over untold generations, humans slowly came to recognize that their lives reflected that of the natural world of death and rebirths in its endless repetition, but humans realized that they possessed something different from the animal world.

Shanidar Cave overview. Public domain

This still hidden world, alien to sensory perception, was the realization of a binary world, that of the animals in nature, and the human world of culture. The gateway between the light of day or upper world and the darkness of the night or lower world, was gradually and at a painstakingly slow pace, identified as two distinct worlds. Individuals that mastered this awakening to the duality of the worlds of nature and culture shall later be called 'shaman'. Over the years, learning, mastery of a mythic world and esoteric exercises were trusted to those individuals to dominate the field of opposites, for their ability to associate with these two worlds. Through time, this perception took hold and became integral to the belief of traditional cultures up to modern times. Inherited from a long-lost past, it is perceived that all life forms, including the vegetal and mineral worlds, are indivisible from the natural universe, the Maya-*Tz'utujil* call *rawajal* or the "heart of things."

Neanderthals were already aware of an afterlife, as revealed by the remains of rituals found in their burials dating



to 35,000 years ago at the Shanidar cave in the Zagros mountains of Iraq. In the cave is a necropolis with more than 35 burials, including that of a baby. Some remains were found lying in a flexed position on a bed of shaped stone points, encased in coffin-like stones with stone slab covers. In Shanidar IV, the deceased was provided with bunches of seven types of flowers, identified by their pollens, placed in tightly packed clusters at the head and feet of the individual. The pollens were later identified by palynologists from several medicinal flowers, still used today by rural Iraqi farmers, as remedies for minor ailments. What Shanidar IV irrefutably shows, is that Neanderthals preceded modern humans in beliefs and rituals that transcend earthly existence. Faith was already there.

Enter the Shaman

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), the greatest religious historian of the 20th century, defines shamanism as a "*coherent system of esoteric beliefs and practices that attempt to organize and explain the interrelationship between the cosmos, nature and man*". The practices of shamanism are language specific, with rituals and archetypes grounded in a group's immediate environment for its subsistence and survival. *Tat* Rigoberto underlines "*today the shaman functions are as critical to the lives of traditional communities as they were to their forefathers, because they are indispensable caretakers of the spiritual health of their society.*"

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A Three-Tiered World

Tat Rigoberto explains the traditional belief in upper and lower worlds. In the past, the belief in a three-level world was associated with the observation of nature's daily cycles, such as the alternances day-night and the paths of the sun and moon, among other natural events. Furthermore, worldviews of most ancient cultures are based on a seven-point observation of their spatial universe and its endless repetition. Those are: the four cardinal points, the zenith (benevolent forces), the nadir (malevolent forces) and the center (the living world located at the intersection of the first six points), that is, the seventh point where the observer stands. Of note is the fact that the nadir was believed to be an actual

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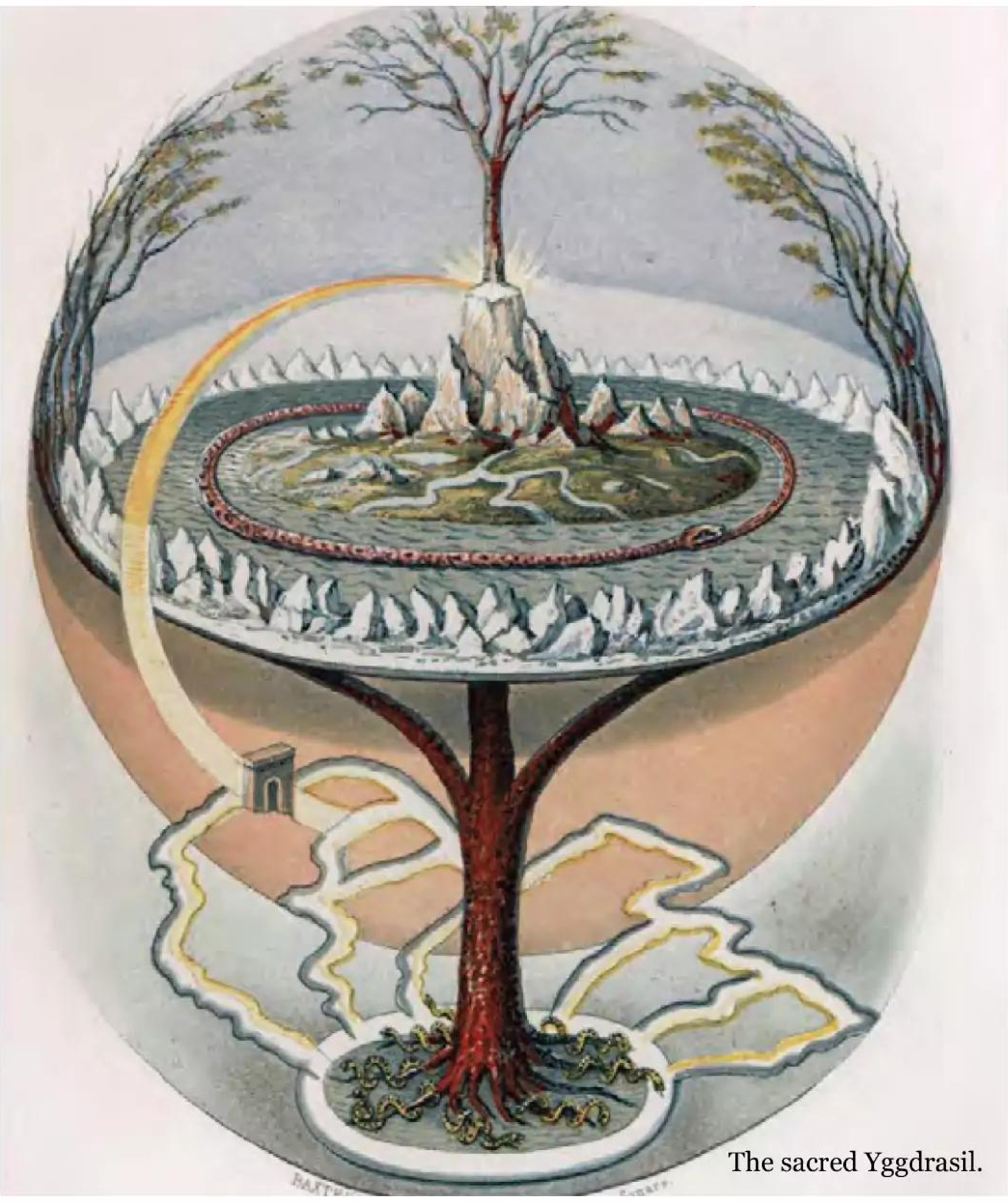
place, the abode of malevolent deities below the flat world of humankind. This ancient world view is supported by the observation of the sun and moon as they appear to travel through both the upper and under worlds.

The celestial bodies were seen crossing the visible world on an east-to-west path and were believed to continue their course from west-to-east in the underworld at night, to rise again the following dawn. After all, sensory perception of a flat world could not be denied, since the sun indeed disappeared at dusk to reappear again at dawn at the same place as yesterday in an endless repetition, undeniable witness of the eternal return. Shamans, in the context of this worldview, were recognized masters of their communities' sacred landscape, especially for springs and caves abode of water and their deities.

The Tree Of Life

The interface between the upper and lower worlds is the actual world, where the observer stands. The link, between the living and spiritual worlds, is the tree of life or *axis mundi* (axis of the world) that, for Maya communities past and present, is the ceiba tree or *yaaché* (*ceiba pentendra*), believed to be used by gods and deities to descend and ascend cosmic levels. In traditional societies, the supernatural powers from gods and deities of other worlds are accessed by spiritual leaders in their sacred landscape at locations such as caves, mountain tops and everlasting springs above or below ground.

Shamanic practices are grounded in traditions that span untold generations in an unbroken chain of ascendants of the same linguistic group. *Tat* Nicolasa clarifies language as the sole identity qualifier, since it is believed that "*malevolent forces may take the shape of a person of the family or clan but cannot speak the language*." Of note is that for most creeds, ancient or contemporary, language is the sole vector that carries the hallowed word of gods. That is why shamanic



The sacred Yggdrasil.

rituals are language specific and conform to the spiritual maturity of a group.

For each human society, there is only one tree of life in the world, theirs! This mythical tree is believed to exist for that group alone, for its people are convinced of their uniqueness at the center of the universe. In the absence of trees in their environment, natural features such as a mountain or a cave will be afforded the same mythical value. In all agrarian cultures, the tree of life is the indisputable expression of immortality or life undying. This perception is rooted in the fact that, with few exceptions, the world of plants for all cultures, is the undeniable proof of the persistence and permanence of life through its never-ending cycles of birth and rebirth.

Layers Of The Universe

Tat Antolin and *Tat* Nicolasa, both Maya-*Tz'utujil'* explain the shaman's spatial multi-layered organization of their universe. They stress that in traditional societies, the upper and under worlds are perceived as being made of a number of layers that vary from culture-to-culture. In ancestral societies therefore, "*what is learned is more important than what is seen*". A remark that underscores the fact that all myths and beliefs are products of human imagination, in most cultures, past and present. As Eliade puts it: "*the upper world is regarded as the home of ancestors, benevolent deities, light and life, while the under world is identified with malevolent deities, spirits, darkness, danger, and death*".

Tat Nicolasa underlined the importance of the repetitive seasonal course of celestial bodies in rites, observed through manmade or landscape features to ascertain their regularity. Priest-shamans had to confirm the accuracy of a sun that would never fail to reappear at the exact same place, day after day, solstice after solstice, equinox after equinox.

The first sanctuaries were built for deities, mediators between the supernatural world and humankind.

The only reason for this need to believe in entities beyond human condition was food. For most of early human history, daily sustenance was a persistent concern; the storage of food was to be mastered much later in time. Even then, however, dependence on the vagaries of seasons and climate kept communities in constant dread. Natural events such as unpredictable weather, flood, drought, or insect plague among other factors, brought constant fear, anxiety, conflict and hunger.

According to Evans, archaeological data of lake sediments indicate severe droughts repeated during the Maya Classic period (600-900 CE), when *"... annual rain decreased between 41% and 54%, with intervals of up to 70% rainfall reduction during peak drought conditions... the droughts are considered contributing factors to the eventual Maya collapse"*. Catastrophic droughts were ascribed to malevolent deities' actions that punished people for their lack of devotion, as well as members of the priesthood and the nobility, who were at times overthrown as failed agents of the deities. It is no wonder then that humans sought solace and help from their shamans, needed go-betweens, to commune with the other world and help carry people's unpredictable burdens.

Gender Neutral Shamans

The name 'shaman' is gender neural, and applies to men and women alike, recognized in traditional communities as religious specialists and masters of the sacred landscape. Initiation rituals, however, are gender specific by reason of the candidates' physical and emotional particulars. Shamans of both genders may act in concert for specific situations when called to ward off malevolent male and female deities, as well as during ceremonies when under stress by hostile forces from both genders. In the Americas, it is relatively common for husband and wife to be shamans; *Tat* Antolin and his wife *Tat* Nicolasa are an example.

Both agree with Eliade that:
"the role of shaman is performed by intelligent individuals who fulfill a number of important functions in their communities. They are healers, say prayers, direct puberty rituals and major ceremonies such as at the time of crop planting and harvesting among others, and for individuals' life cycles. They are keepers of the genealogies of the society, recite myths, do ritual dances and chants during traditional events. They are very knowledgeable about nature and influence decisions for hunting and conservation of resources. Their functions as mediators in situations of social conflict within the community, or with another group, is very important".

They may not, however, for any reason including sickness, use their abilities for themselves. They then need to call on another shaman or a medicine man or woman, to help them in their predicament.

Furthermore, *Tat* Rigoberto adds, "*together with the village headman or council of elders, shamans manage the community's conflicts and priorities that emerge with changes and events from beyond the village.*" Tedlock explains it as such: "*they need to constantly reshape the perception and ideas of the "kaxlan" world (Maya-K'iche' for 'world of foreigners'), while they still must answer to their own fundamental beliefs shaped by thousands of generations*".

To Become A Shaman

Eliade explains how a shaman is selected by the community.

"The position of shaman may be inherited or revealed in a vision or a dream. Someone may also become a shaman simply by following the vocation, but in this case, he/she is considered less powerful".

Tat Antolin concurs with Eliade that:
"*as a general rule the shaman is not*

accepted in his community unless he or she has received two essential kinds of teachings: the mastery of ecstasy (dreams, trances, etc.), and traditional shamanic techniques, that will include learning the names and functions of spirits, the mythology and genealogy of the tribe, develop a secret language, and other ritual aspects".

In most traditional societies, initiation requires years of arduous study under the guidance of an elder shaman. In Colombia, the Kogi Indians require two nine-year cycles before ultimate initiation.

Gender relationship within a group, *Tat* Nicolasa explains, is governed by "*ancestral family and community-tested rules that aim to keep antagonism and latent violence at bay*." For example, the nature-culture duality is underscored at the time of menstrual cycles perceived in ancient and traditional cultures as a dreaded return to nature. As such, the event "*is recognized as a recurring antagonism to culture, given its unavoidable nature*." At that time, in most traditional societies, a woman is confined to a separate hut, so she is temporarily excluded from culture.

In the case of young males, the initiation to adulthood aims at forcefully bridging the duality to incorporate the individual into the group. Prior to initiation, the young boy is still assimilated to nature. *Tat* Antolin points out that rituals "*aim at testing the young man through lengthy isolation from family and the social group with often painful rites such as circumcision, because pain leaves a powerful imprint on a young mind.*"

In most ancient cultures initiation for both genders, natural for females and ritual for males, took place at puberty to confirm the ultimate break with nature while asserting the cultural character of the individuals and their new status in society.

Descendants and Ancestors

Tat Rigoberto stresses a key aspect of rituals governing the relationship between descendants and ancestors (the *nan'tats*), saying that:

"*in traditional societies, ancestor worship is the intangible constituent of individual and family spiritual lives.*" He underlines that: "*shamans may assist in communing with ancestors, but it is the descendant alone that shall address the forefathers to intercede in the resolution of family or individual conflict.*"

Ancestors, as Eliade remarks, are believed to influence the lives of individuals of the same patrilineage, trusted to help settle disputes with ancestors of other patrilineage "*for grievances that may have taken place a few generations before, unsettled at the time of the demise of interested parties, the antagonism still lingering beyond the grave*".

Ancestor worship lies at the core of shamanic practices thus it is important to address the rites associated with the remains of selected ancestors through second burial. The continued physical presence of select ancestors in the past, took place in the family's residential complex. For the same reasons second burial rituals today aims at overcoming social death over biological death. With this ritual, descendants keep their connection with the departed and establish the fact that the ancestor is still not socially dead within the family. Tedlock explains:

"*Not all progenitors, however, qualify as ancestors, only those lineage members who left a compelling impact on family cohesion, resource acquisition or lineage alliance, are*

worthy of being venerated in this fashion".

Second burial, therefore, sanctions the rights of surviving members of the family to socio-economic claims in the community, backed up by ancestors. McAnany summarizes the ritual as "*practices grounded in pragmatism that drew power from the past, legitimize the current state of affairs, and charted a course for the descendants*".

Hanal Pixan Second Burial Rituals

Second burial rituals observed in the Yucatán today, may also be seen in other traditional communities of the Americas, albeit with local variations. After two years or more the process calls for the selected ancestor's body to be removed from the grave, and the bones cleaned by women who have long passed the age of reproduction. They are then placed in a small (3'x3'x2') wooden crate lined with a flowered hand-embroidered cloth. The wooden crate is then placed in a permanent setting in a different dedicated cemetery. This ceremony is attended by members of the family who, at that time, share with the departed their hopes and concerns, while thanking the ancestor for their own lives. This second burial ceremony is called *Hanal Pixán* in the Maya-*Yucatec* language of Mexico, words that mean 'food for the souls' and take place on the Days of the Dead from November 1st to 3rd.

Families may elect to repeat the ritual at the anniversary of the death of the departed, when the bones are again removed from the small wooden crate, and carefully cleaned, while family members

silently pray and petition the ancestor. Once cleaned, the bones are put back into the small crate with a fresh hand-embroidered cloth with flowers and the name of the ancestor. The Hanal Pixán ceremony is a reminder to the descendants that they are a mere link in the precious chain of life from grand-parents to grand-children. Above all, worship of family ancestors is grounded in an age-old stern but inescapable logic: No ancestor-No descendant-No Life!

What are the means, I ask my mentors, a shaman uses to establish his association with the supernatural world? They answer that to do so, a shaman is compelled to attain altered states of consciousness that vary among cultures, and may be achieved through deep meditation, sensory deprivation or sudden visions of supernatural beings or situation. In the Americas, however, ecstasy is more frequently attained by using psychotropic plants, the so called "*vines of the soul*," since nature is regarded as a "*gift from the gods, providers of food and medicinal plants on which human lives depend*" (Tedlock 1990:87).

The shaman's tasks require communion with other strata of reality, so how do they access the various levels of those "other worlds"? According to the beliefs of indigenous tribes, the echeloned worlds lying beyond the field of ordinary perception correspond to a microcosm (or micro-worldview) consisting of a sequence of dimensions of an individual's own interior world, or inner scale of human consciousness. The shamans claim that in their sensory experiences, induced by psychotropic natural substances,

they penetrate into the different levels of those "other worlds" as though through narrow openings.

Traveling Between Worlds

The use of hallucinogenic natural substances is an ancient worldwide cultural practice. In most traditional cultures, its use is associated with the so called shamanic "flight," or feeling of disassociation during which *"ch'ulel" the "soul stuff of the living universe from the other world"* (Freidel-Schele-Parker, 1993:142), as the Maya-*K'iche'* refer to it, is believed to separate from the body and penetrate into other dimensions of the cosmos.

Tat Rigoberto agrees with Eliade when the later says that:

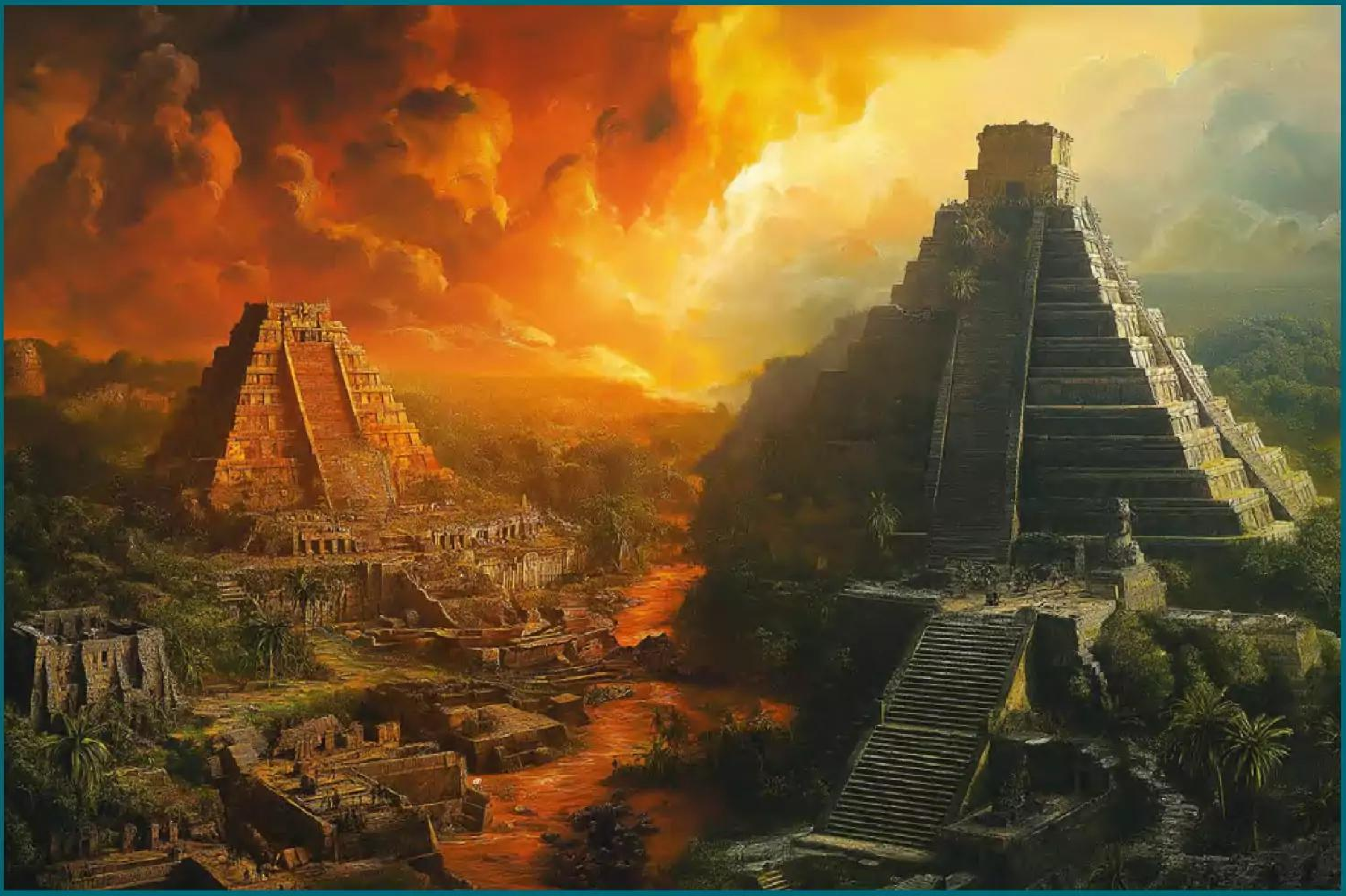
"during these flights shamans call on supernatural and ancestral beings about present and future events, learn new spells, chants and dances, or search for cures to ward off diseases."

They roam the underworld for remedies to cure the souls of sick people and help those dying through the difficult path on the way to their last resting place. The idea of other dimensions as dwelling places of the spirit of the dead and fantastic beings is based on the experience of the ecstatic journey of the shaman.

"The image shamans form of these dimensions and the description they give of them depends on the projective process of their psychological personality and experience as practitioners, as well as on the cultural and religious tradition of the community and its environment" (Eliade, 1964:124).

Are there "bad" shamans? I ask my mentors. Yes, like all humans they may have a darker side that must be overcome, alone or with the help of another practitioner. He or she may not succeed in overpowering the influence of the underworld, for all beliefs and creeds have their dark side. It is up to spiritual leaders to stand up against such destructive forces, however, as for all human endeavors, they may or may not succeed.

(There are other important ritual aspects such as, conception, birth,



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marriage, the shaman's "na'wal" or totem animal and more, which will not be examined in this article.)

"*Ancestor veneration is not a cultic practice by a group sharing an obsessive or esoteric interest in the dead. Neither is it a mindless worship of idol, nor is it about the dead. It is rather, about how the living make use of the dead*" (McAnany,1995). It is a type of active discourse with the past and the future, embodying what Carlsen and Prechtel described as "*the centrality of Maya understanding of death and rebirth, as described in the K'iche' and Tzu'tujil traditions*" (1991:42)

Neither is ancestor veneration a substitute to religion regardless of creed.
The foremost difference between monotheism and ancestor worship, is that the first is collective while the second is strictly individual. Their antagonism, following the conquest of the New World, stems from the fact that ancestor worship was understood as an inadmissible means of escape from the new religion.

During the 26-days sacred Tzol'kin calendar ceremonies, seven public fires burn in dedicated altars throughout Momostenango (*Mumut'zli* in *K'iche'*), to receive supplicants offerings. The seventh and last altar (the *kokoch*) is in front of the town's church. At pre-conquest times, however, informants say the *kokoch* was located at the crossing where the transept within the church is today, below which is believed, revered shamans are still buried. Shamanism, as old as humankind, was forcefully coerced by history to bend to new truths and realities, but still defies the test of time.

In his writing, which you can find at ***georgefery.com***. George addresses a number of topics, from history to daily living, architecture and people of various countries and cultures. He is a fellow of the **Institute of Maya Studies** and also a member in good standing of the **Maya Exploration Center**, as well as the Archaeological Institute of America.

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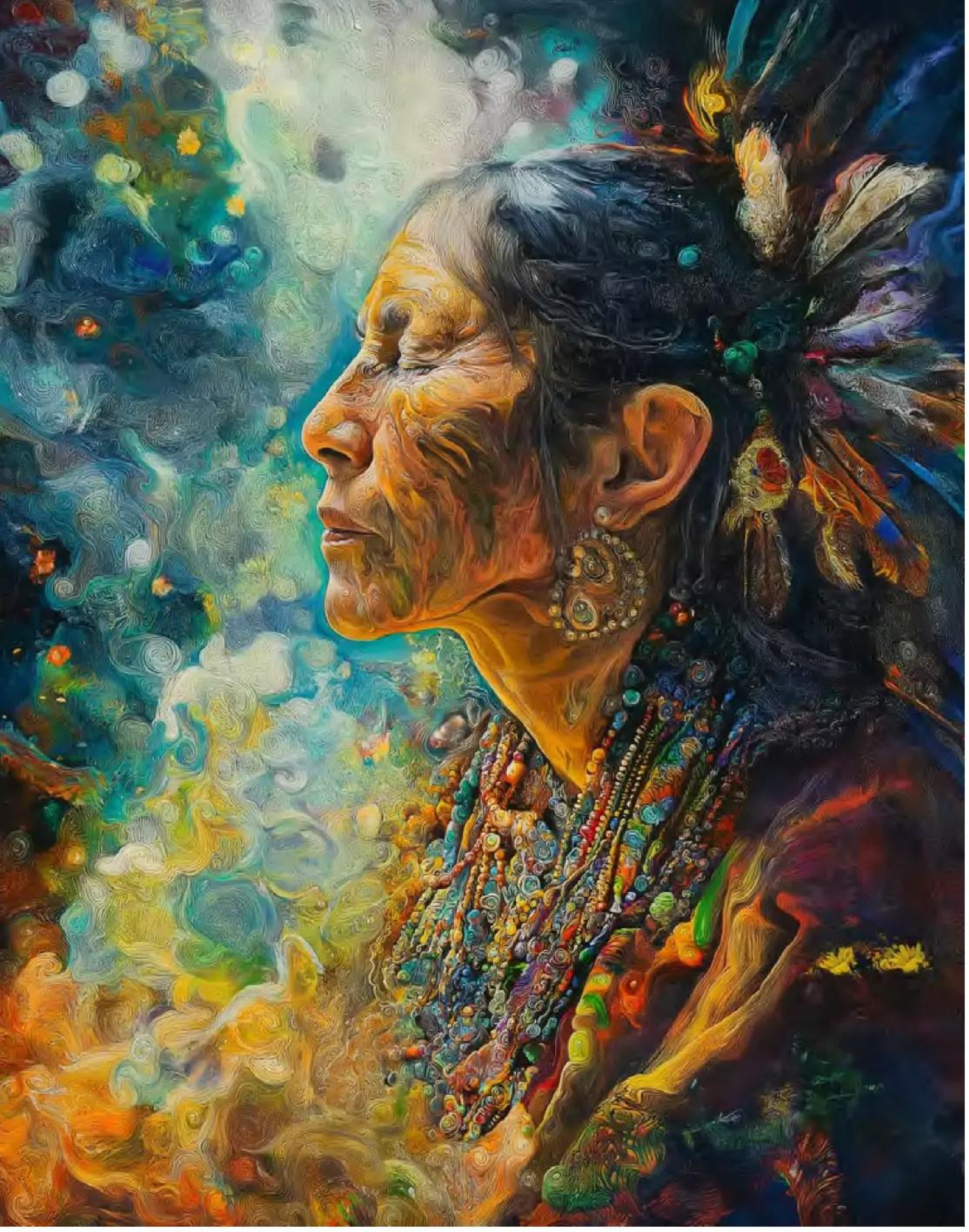
Shamanism in Ancient Mesoamerica:

A Journey to the World of the Gods

BY ALEKSA VUČKOVIĆ

Shamanism, a spiritual and religious practice rooted in the belief of an intermediary connection between the human world and the spiritual realms, holds an important place in the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica. The region, encompassing present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, was home to advanced ancient civilizations such as the Olmecs, Maya, Zapotecs, and Aztecs. These societies developed intricate belief systems where shamanism played a crucial role in social, religious, and political spheres. Shamanism in ancient Mesoamerica was not a uniform practice but varied significantly across different cultures. However, it consistently centered around the shaman as a pivotal figure capable of traversing both the physical and spiritual worlds.



A Gateway Between the Realms

The origins of shamanism in Mesoamerica can be traced back to the early pre-Columbian periods. Archaeological evidence suggests that as early as 1500 BC, shamans were active in the Olmec civilization, often regarded as the “mother culture” of Mesoamerica. Olmec art and iconography frequently depict figures believed to be shamans, adorned with jaguar pelts and masks, signifying their role as intermediaries between the human and supernatural realms. The Olmecs’ reverence for the jaguar, an animal associated with power and mysticism, permeated subsequent Mesoamerican cultures, reinforcing the shaman’s status as a mediator endowed with supernatural abilities. “Shamanism is a term used by anthropologists and historians of religion to describe similar systems of religious thought and practice centered on the role of ritual specialists who enter trance states in order to communicate with the supernatural world for the benefit of their communities. It has been posited as the first human religion.” (Shamanism in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, Jordan, Keith, 2008. Encyclopedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures).

In ancient Mesoamerican societies, shamans served multiple roles: healers, diviners, ritual

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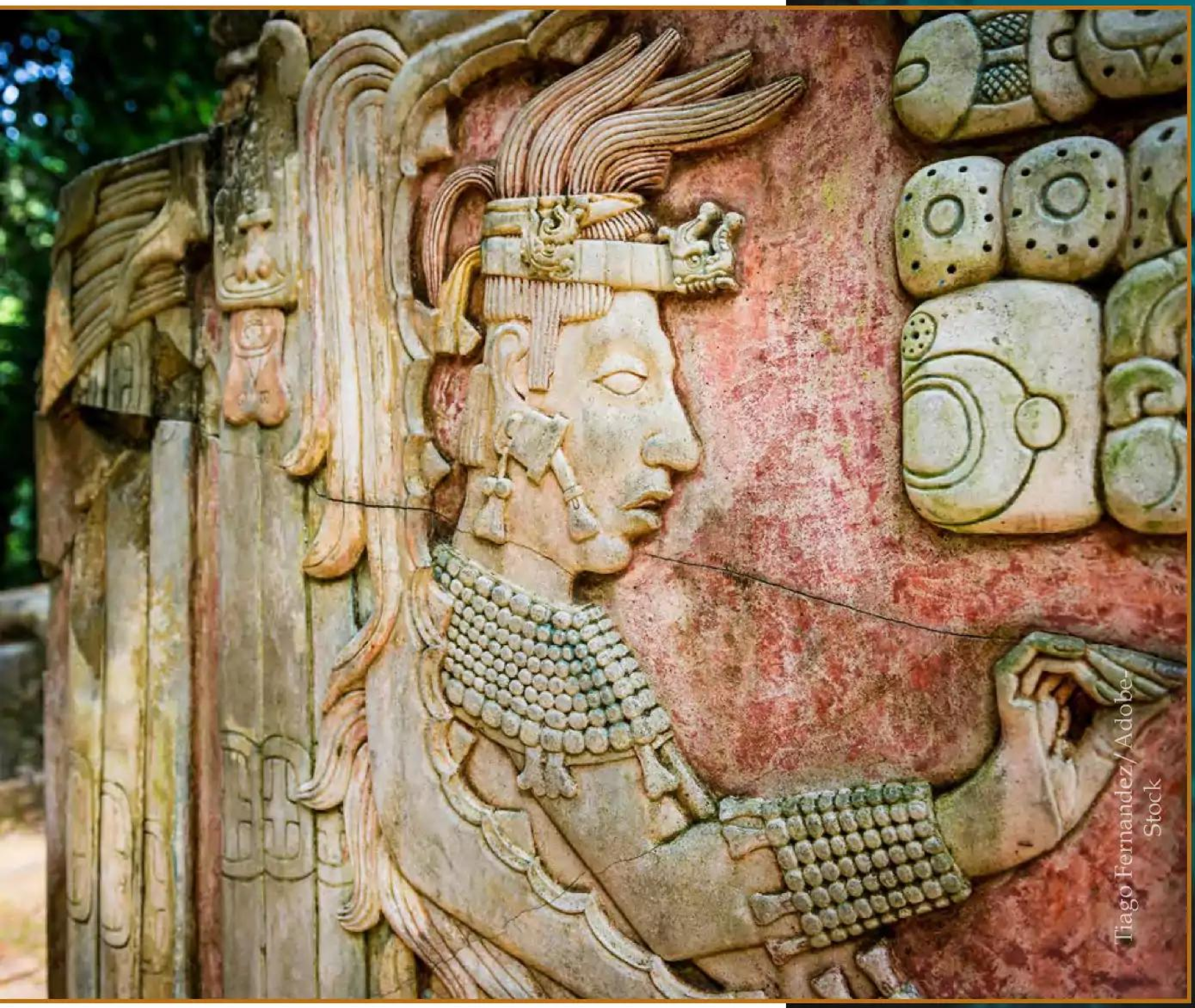
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specialists, and spiritual leaders. They were believed to possess the ability to communicate with gods, ancestors, and spirits, often entering altered states of consciousness to perform their duties. This communication was facilitated through various means, including trance states induced by hallucinogenic substances, fasting, rhythmic drumming, and dance.

One of the primary functions of shamans, however, was healing. Illness in Mesoamerican belief systems was often attributed to spiritual causes such as the displeasure of gods, malevolent spirits, or soul loss. Shamans would diagnose and treat these ailments through rituals, herbal remedies, and spiritual journeys to retrieve lost souls or appease offended deities. They also played a crucial role in divination, interpreting omens and natural signs to predict future events and guide community decisions. This predictive aspect was vital in agricultural societies reliant on favorable weather patterns and successful harvests.

Masters of Appeasing the Mighty Gods

Rituals and ceremonies were integral to shamanic practice in ancient Mesoamerica. These rites were conducted to ensure cosmic balance, to appease gods, and maintain harmony between the human and spiritual worlds. Among the most significant rituals were those dedicated to agricultural fertility, rain, and the cycles of life and death. The Maya civilization, for instance, had an elaborate calendar system and cosmology deeply intertwined with shamanic practices. The shamans, often referred to as "daykeepers," used the Tzolk'in (a special sacred calendar) to determine auspicious dates for rituals and agricultural activities. They conducted ceremonies to honor Chaac, the rain god, invoking his favor for bountiful rains essential for maize cultivation. These rituals often involved offerings, bloodletting, and dance, believed to open portals to the spiritual realm. Sometimes even human sacrifice was involved.

This human sacrifice, although a controversial aspect, was a significant element of Mesoamerican shamanistic rituals, particularly among the Aztecs. Sacrifices were seen as the ultimate offerings to the gods, ensuring the continued movement of the sun and the fertility of the earth. Shamans would lead these ceremonies, communicating with deities to receive their blessings and maintain cosmic order. It is important to remember that these societies did not see death in the same way we do today. Believers often volunteered to be sacrificed, and in other cases, it was the prisoners of war that were offered to the gods.

The rich symbolism and iconography associated with shamanism are evident in the art and artifacts of ancient Mesoamerica. Animals such as jaguars, serpents, and eagles frequently appear in shamanic contexts, symbolizing power, transformation, and divine connection. The jaguar, in particular, was revered for its nocturnal prowess and association with the underworld and shamanic journeys. Artifacts like masks, figurines, and ceremonial tools often depict shamans in transformative states, blending human and animal features. These representations emphasize the shaman's ability to transcend ordinary reality and access otherworldly knowledge. The jade masks of the Maya and the carved stelae of the Olmecs are prime examples, showcasing intricate designs that highlight the shaman's esteemed status and their role as intermediaries.

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Complex Journey to Other Planes of Existence

Central to Mesoamerican shamanism was the use of hallucinogenic substances to induce altered states of consciousness. These substances, derived from plants such as peyote, morning glory seeds, and psilocybin mushrooms, were considered sacred tools enabling shamans to communicate with the spiritual realm. The ingestion of these entheogens facilitated visions, spiritual journeys, and encounters with deities and spirits.

"Throughout Mesoamerica, shamans ingested copious amounts of various organic hallucinogens, narcotics and neurotoxins in order to reach their desired trance-state. These substances include seeds from the cojobana tree (cohoba) and numerous varieties of hallucinogenic fungi. In addition to this, there is evidence that cultures like the Mexica hunted for and made use of a widely growing small cactus called peyote. Peyote was an especially important component of the divinatory rituals of the Teochichimeca, who were the ancestors of the Mexica. The Mesoamerican peoples also utilized various fauna in their quest for a deep trance. There is evidence of shamans licking the toxic skin secretions from poisonous toads, such as Bufo marinus, in order to achieve a brief stupor. Another concoction that has been found to be a potent psychoactive substance is referred to as teotlacualli. Teotlacualli is a mixture composed of tobacco, crushed scorpions, live spiders and centipedes that the shaman then smears all over his body or drinks." (Psychoactive Substances and Shamans: An Influential Pairing", Hollace Good, 2011, Undergraduate Research Journal).

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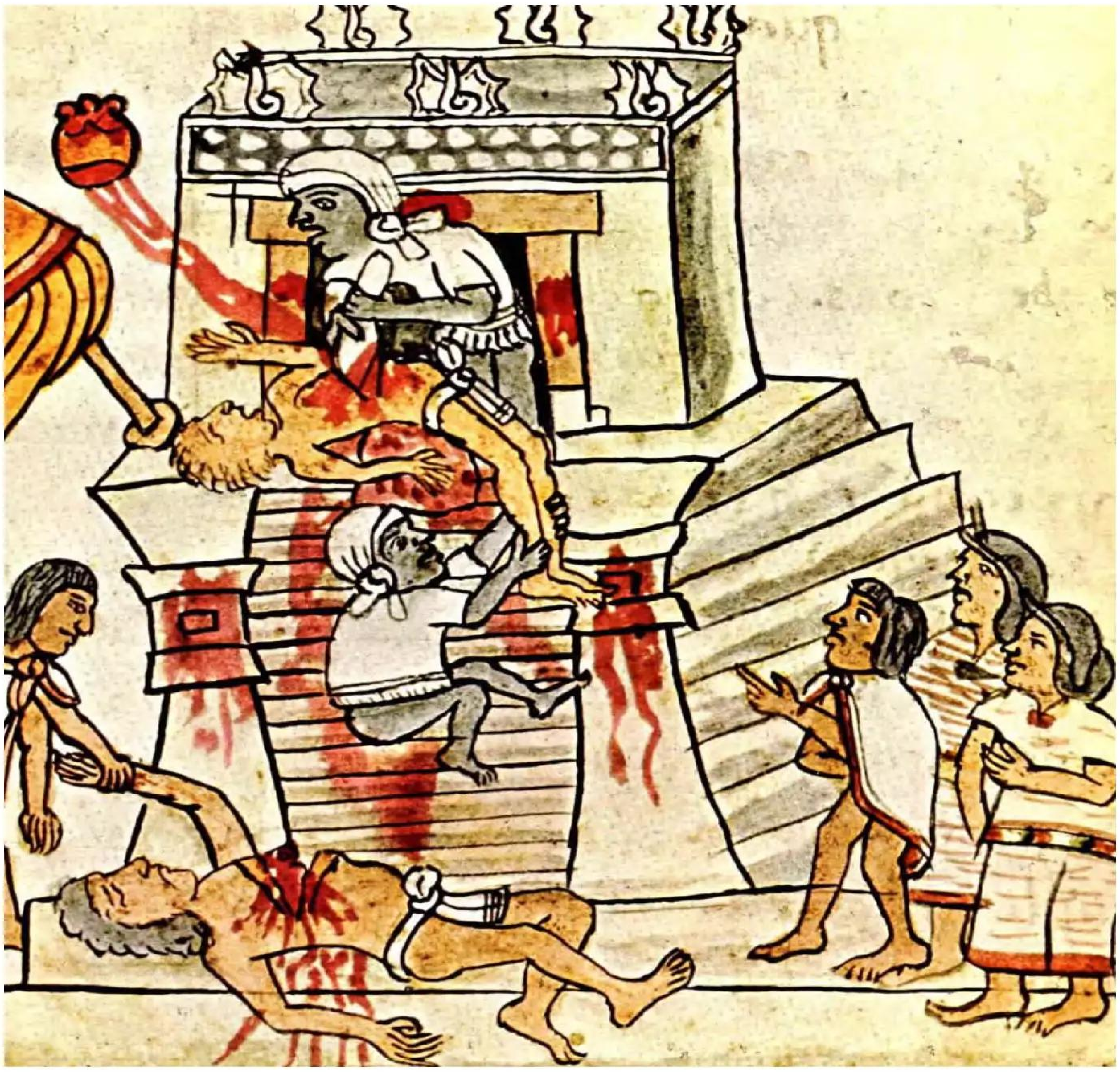
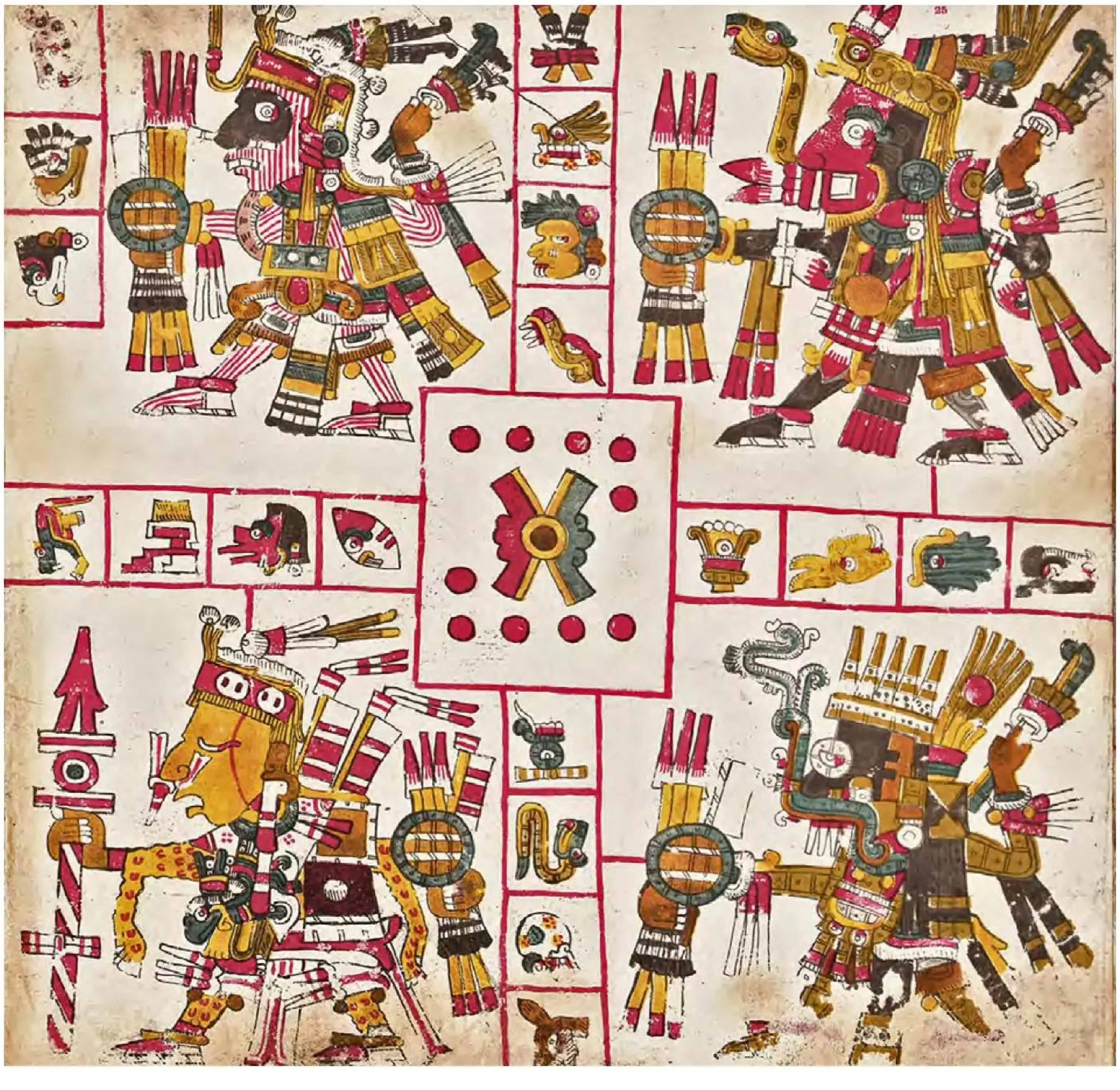
The Aztecs, for example, revered teonanácatl, or "divine mushroom," using it in various rituals to gain insights and divine guidance. Similarly, the Maya utilized balché, a fermented beverage made from the bark of the Lonchocarpus tree, often consumed during ceremonial gatherings to enhance spiritual experiences. The use of these substances was carefully regulated within ritual contexts, underscoring their significance and the shaman's specialized knowledge in administering them. Also, shamans held considerable socio-political influence in ancient Mesoamerican societies. Their ability to mediate between the earthly and divine realms endowed them with authority that extended beyond spiritual matters. They often served as advisors to rulers, influencing political decisions and legitimizing leadership through their perceived connection with the gods. It should not be surprising that manipulation of the masses was often utilized in such matters.



.The Speakers of the Shadow Language

In the Maya civilization, the ahau, or king, was often regarded as the highest shaman, embodying both political and spiritual leadership. The king performed key rituals and communicated with deities, reinforcing his divine right to rule. This dual role underscored the intertwining of religion and politics in Mesoamerican culture, where the shaman's spiritual authority bolstered the political hierarchy. The legacy of ancient Mesoamerican shamanism persists in contemporary indigenous practices across the region. Many modern-day Maya, Nahua, and other indigenous groups continue to revere shamans, known as curanderos or healers, who maintain traditional knowledge of medicinal plants, rituals, and spiritual practices - knowledge which was inherited across generations of healers. These practices, though adapted to contemporary contexts, reflect the enduring significance of shamanism as a cultural and spiritual cornerstone.



“The shamanic practices of ancient Mesoamerica reveal a profound connection between humanity and the cosmos, where every ritual, every trance, was a step into the boundless realms of the divine. These ancient spiritual intermediaries not only healed the sick and foretold the future but also embodied the intricate relationship between the physical world and the spiritual forces that shaped their reality. Their traditions offer a complex worldview of wisdom, intertwining the mystical with the practical in ways that continue to inspire and intrigue us today.” (Echoes of the Jaguar: Mystical Traditions of Ancient Mesoamerica”, Elizabeth Carter, 2003, University of Oxford Press).

Moreover, the archaeological and ethnohistorical records provide valuable insights into the continuity of shamanic traditions. Codices, such as the Dresden Codex and the Codex Borgia, contain detailed accounts of rituals, cosmology, and shamanic practices, preserving the rich heritage of Mesoamerican spirituality. These texts, along with ongoing anthropological research, help to illuminate the complexities and nuances of ancient shamanism, contributing to a deeper understanding of its historical and cultural impact.

Today, many remote native communities in South America, most notably in Mexico, continue to practice shamanism in some form. In a more modern context, these shamans would be seen as village elders, or village healers, whose knowledge of the land around them and the plants that

Enver Sengul/AdobeStock

grow there is unique and requires a lifetime of study and devotion. For villages that are far in the mountains and woods, so distant from doctors and bustling towns, these healers are often the sole source of help and remedy. And we can safely assume that it was just the same centuries ago, when ancient peoples had to rely on knowledgeable shamans for help and healing.

This continuity of shamanic traditions in contemporary indigenous practices highlights the enduring legacy of such ancient beliefs, reflecting a resilient cultural heritage that continues to inspire and inform modern spiritual practices. Through the study of archaeological findings, historical texts, and living traditions, the profound depth and complexity of shamanism in ancient Mesoamerica continue to captivate scholars and enthusiasts alike, offering a window into the spiritual heart of these remarkable civilizations. ■

Graphic: AdobeStock

SHAMAN QUEENS

of the East

BY MARTINI FISHER

The word ‘shaman’ conjures up images of Native American medicine men smoking peace pipes, dancing in a trance to drumming around a fire or African *sangomas*, adorned with leopard skin, throwing *dollose* bones and shells to divine and drinking beer from calabash. This is far removed from the concept of sophisticated, regal shaman queens of the East in China, Japan and Korea who used their talent and connection with the ‘Otherworld’ to the benefit of their kingdoms and populace. Later this feminine healing power was suppressed and persecuted by religious men, who regarded it as a threat to their faith.

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Woman Shamans on a Global Platform

Worldwide, women have been at the forefront of this field of spiritual healing. In some cultures, they even became leaders. From the Buryats in Mongolia to the Bwiti religion in Gabon, the first shaman was in fact a woman. Other examples of the surviving shamans include *Machi* (a traditional healer and religious leader) of the Mapuche in southern Chile and the *Babaylan* and *Catalonan* of the Philippines. Images and historical descriptions show women in many different roles such as invokers, healers, herbalists, oracles and diviners. They also performed as ecstatic dancers, shapeshifters and priestesses of the ancestors.

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In the practice of *Katjambia* in Namibia, a Himba medicine

Outkast/ AdobeStock

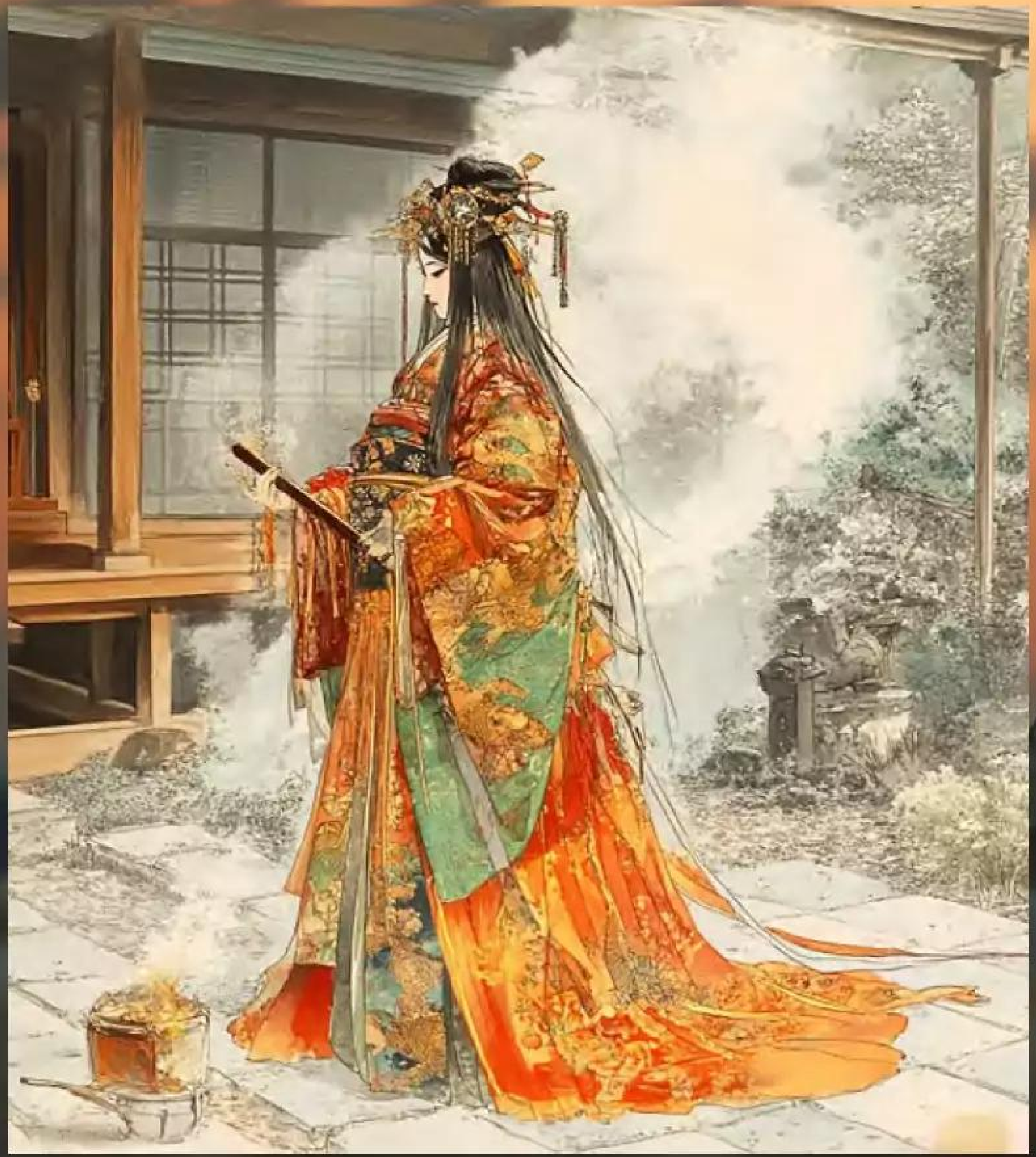
woman absorbs the negative energies into her own body before returning them to the sacred fire of her ancestors, who then release those negative energies. Similar descriptions were recorded by Greco-Roman visitors to Anatolia. At Castabala, in Cappadocia, the priestesses of Artemis Perasia, walked barefoot through a furnace of hot charcoal without experiencing any harm. The healing power of women shamans was occasionally stated in mythology as being able to restore life to the dead. Medea of Colchis revived a dead ram by

Images and historical descriptions show women in many different roles such as invokers, healers, herbalists, oracles and diviners. They also performed as ecstatic dancers, shapeshifters and priestesses of the ancestors.

putting it into a cauldron with potent herbs and incantations. The *Nostoi (Returns*), a lost epic of ancient Greek literature, tells of Medea who rejuvenated Jason's father Aeson in a cauldron.

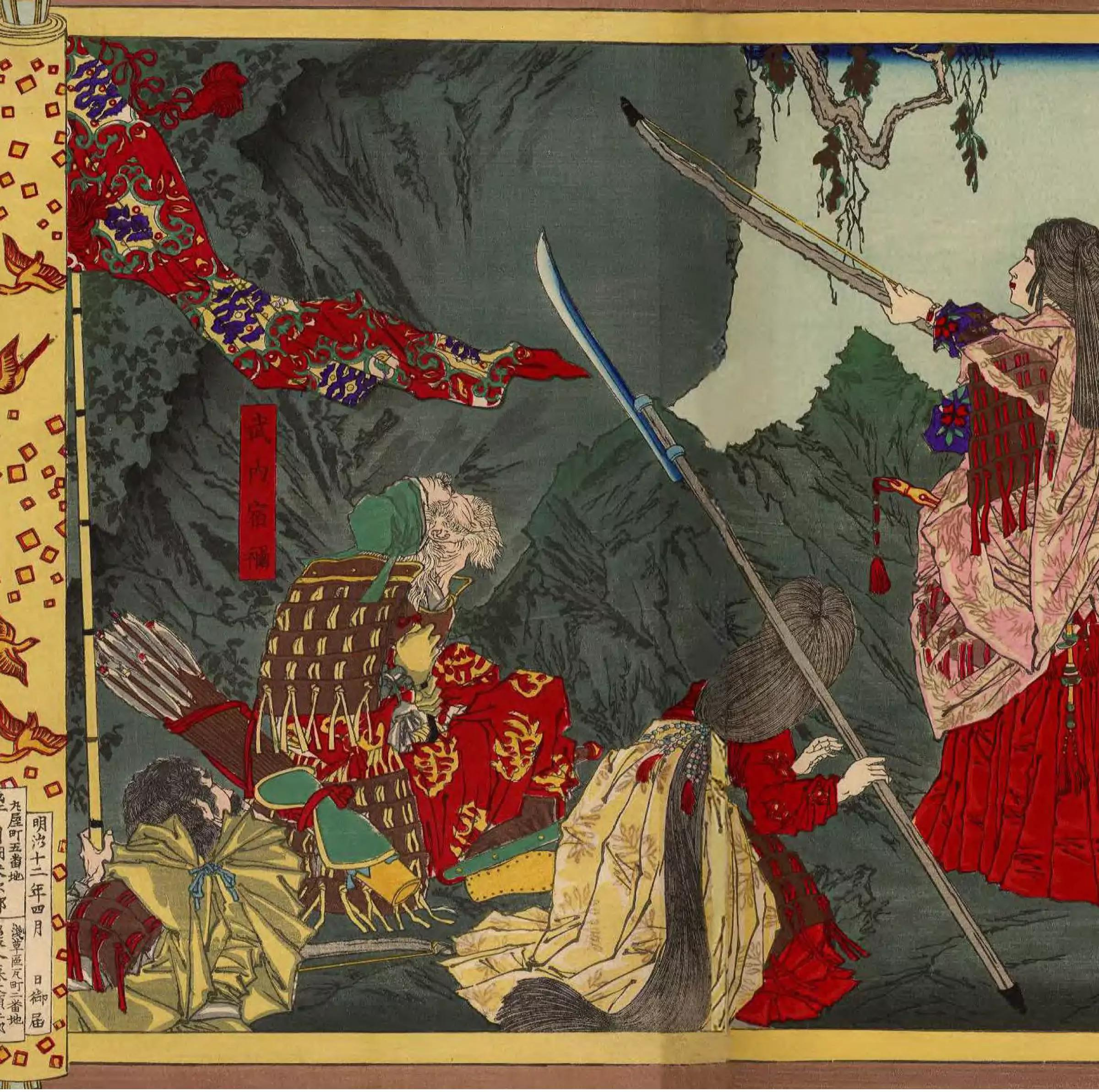
Imperial Wu of China

Guoyu (*Discourses of the states*), a Chinese text collection of anecdotes and discourses from the Spring and Autumn period (770 - 476 BCE), states that although men and spirits did not interact in the ancient world, there were: *"certain people whose understanding enabled them to make a meaningful definition of what lies above and below this world, as well as the insight to illuminate the distant and profound. It was upon these people where the spirits would descend"*. In China, the possessors of such powers were called *xi* (shaman) if they were men, and *wu* (shamaness) if they were women. These men



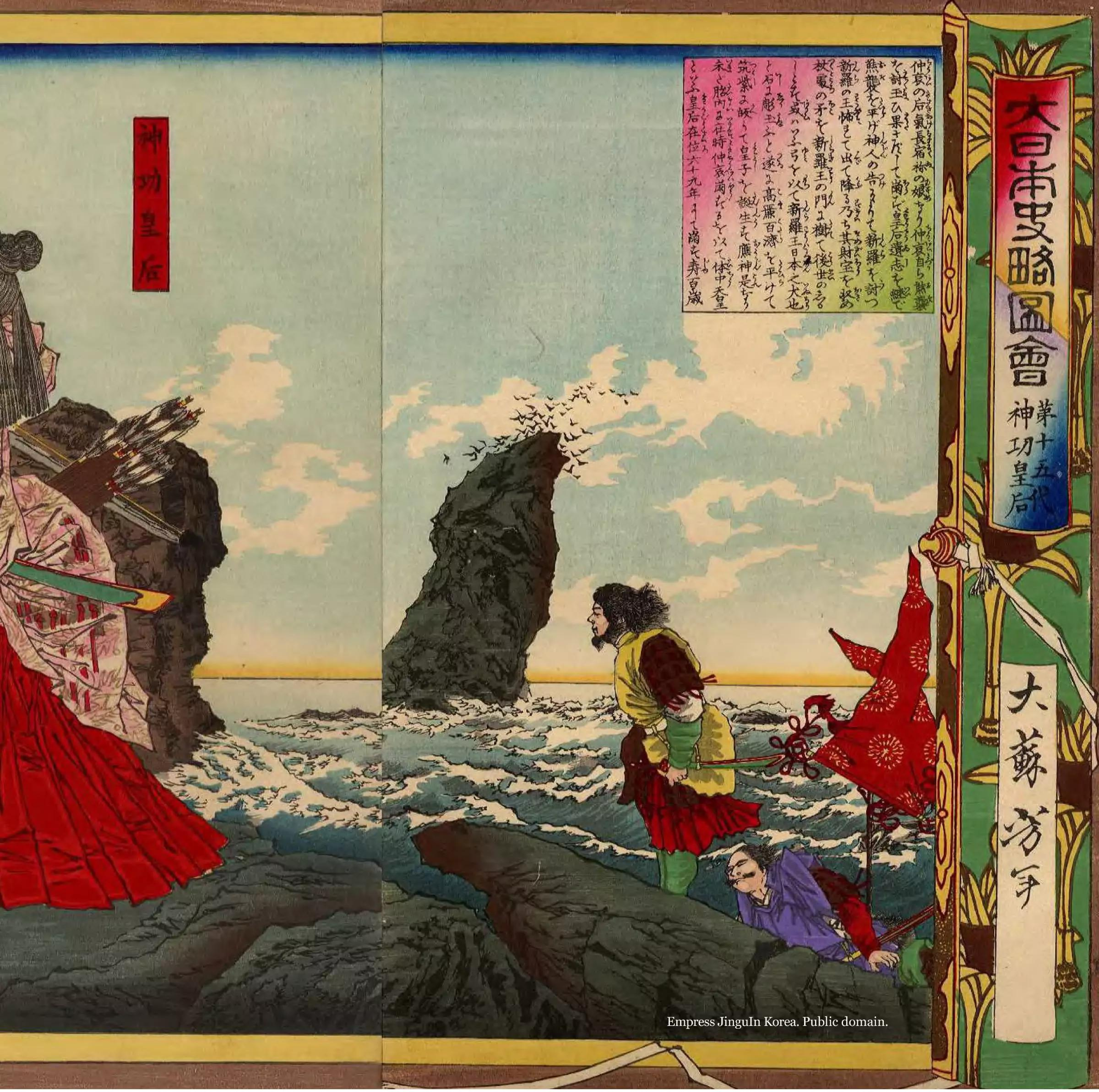
and women supervised the ceremonies, sacrificed to the spirits and managed religious matters. Most importantly, they kept the balance and distinction between the spheres of the divine and the profane. In their turn, the spirits then sent down blessings on the people and prevented any natural calamities. Later, the divine and profane became intermixed and caused great misfortunes. Thus, the communication between heaven and earth had to be terminated. The Chinese *wu* were known as

Gyeongju Cheomseongdae at night. Public domain.


武内宿禰
明治十二年四月 日御届

ecstatic priestesses who danced to the music of drums and flutes until they reached a trance state to receive *shen* (spirit) into their bodies after which they could heal, make prophesies, speak in tongues, swallow swords and spit fires.

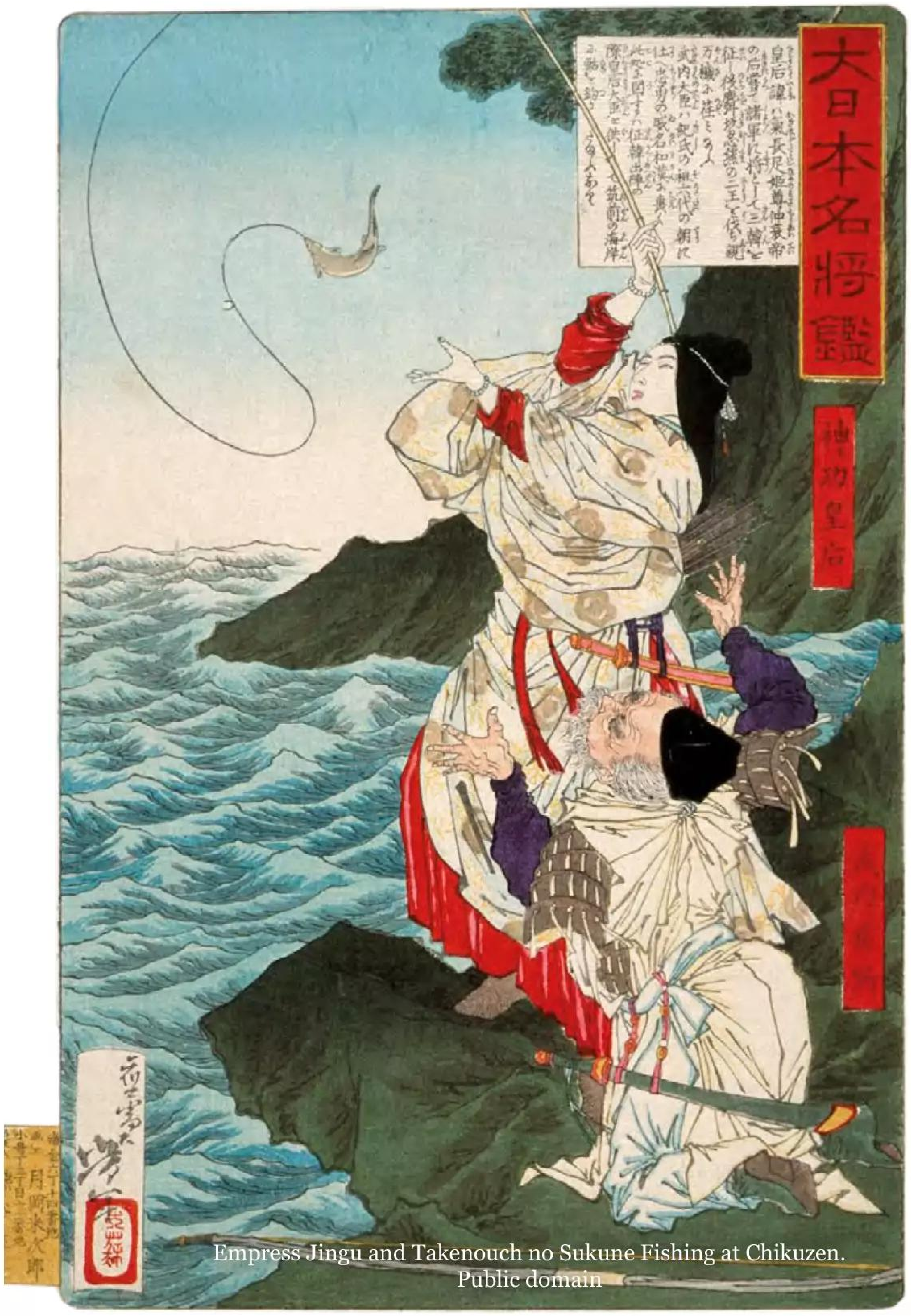
The shaman Queen Himiko (circa 170–248 CE) is mentioned in various ancient histories, dating back to third century China, eight century Japan, and 12th century Korea. The first known historical records of Himiko are found in a Chinese text, *Sanguo Zhi (Records of the Three Kingdoms*). A section on *Gishi-Wajinden (Account of the Wa People) - Wa* being the name for Japan used by the Chinese until the T'ang dynasty, tells of the ascension of Himiko in detail. For generations, Himiko's country only had male rulers. However, after for some 70 or 80 years


大日本史略図會
第十五代 神功皇后
神功皇后
大蘇芳年

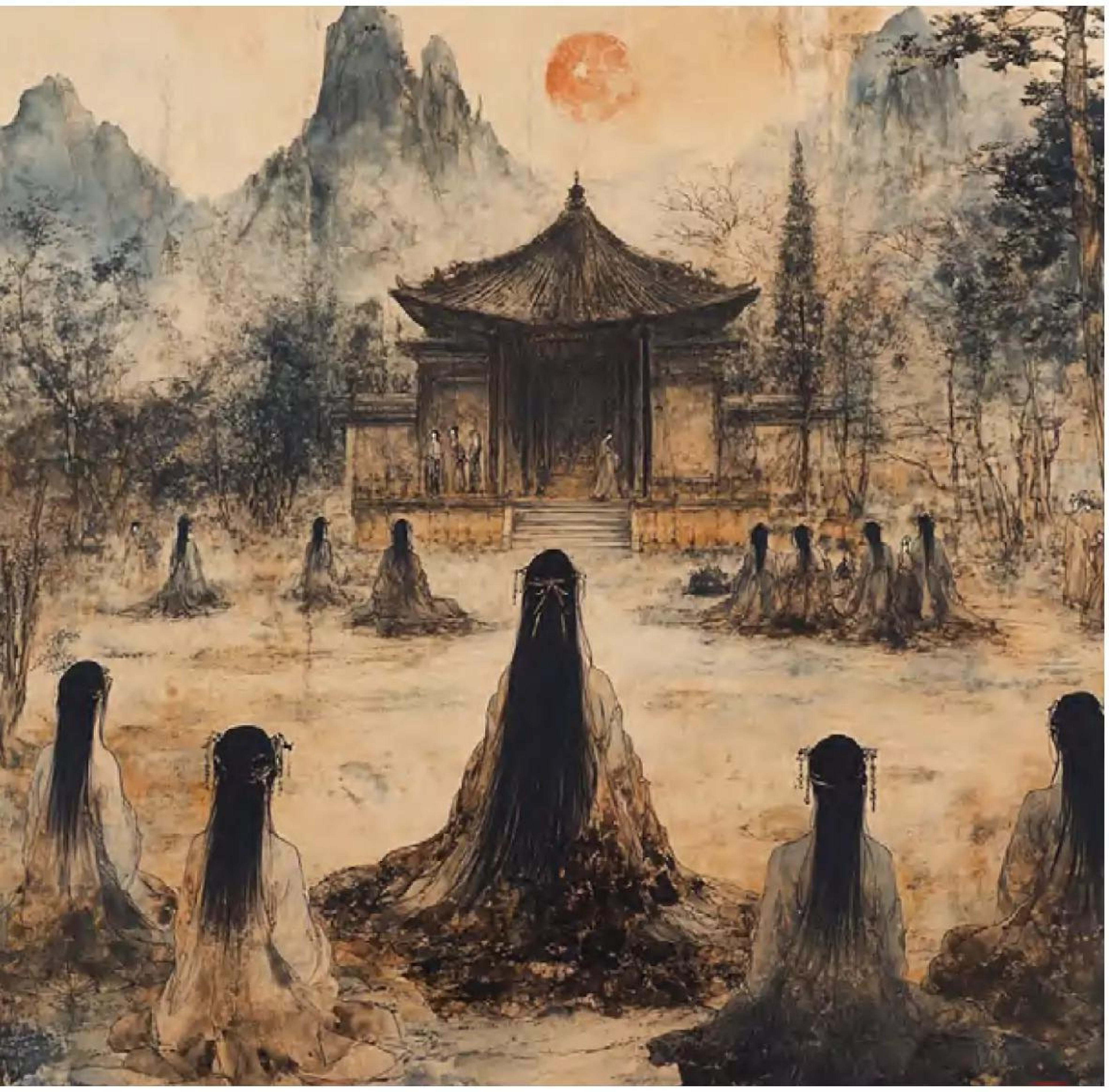
Empress JinguIn Korea. Public domain.

of disturbances and warfare, the people agreed upon a woman for their ruler. Her name was Himiko. Despite her age and maturity, Himiko remained unmarried - preferring to occupy herself with magic and sorcery. She remained unmarried even after she became queen. Instead of a husband, her younger brother assisted her in ruling the country.

Himiko's death was followed by considerable succession disputes, as male claimants kept killing each other in their quest to claim the throne. Eventually, a 13-year old girl named Iyo emerged as the new queen, and restored order. Like Himiko before her, Iyo had substantial shamanic abilities. She preceded to continue tributary relations between Wa and Wei.


大日本名將鑑
神功皇后

Empress Jingu and Takenouch no Sukune Fishing at Chikuzen. Public domain



Shaman Queens of Japan

Although the two oldest Japanese histories, *Kojiki* (circa 712 CE) and *Nihon Shoki* (circa 720 CE) do not mention Queen Himiko, they include other imperial women shamans. One of them is Yamato Totohi Momoso, the shaman aunt of Emperor Sujin (148 - 30 BCE). The *Nihon Shoki* describes her as being able to foresee the future. Yamato Totohi Momoso was inspired by Okuninushi-no-mikoto (Great Lord of the Land) after a series of calamities in the kingdom and, later, married him. However, Okuninushi was only ever seen at night. Yamato Totohi Momoso begged her husband to let her see him. The god answered that he would enter her vanity-case and stay there the next morning.

When she looked into her vanity-case the next day, Yamato Totohi Momoso found a beautiful little snake, of the length and thickness of the cord of a garment. Unprepared for this, Yamato Totohi Momoso screamed. Feeling ashamed, the god left. Regretting her shock, Yamato Totohi Momoso stabbed her genitals with a chopstick. Her tomb is known as the *Hashi-no-haka* (Chopstick Tomb).

Yamatohime-no-mikoto, the daughter of Emperor Suinin (69 BCE - 70 CE), founded the Ise Shrine to the sun-goddess Amaterasu. Emperor Suinin ordered her to find a suitable permanent location to hold ceremonies for Amaterasu. Yamatohime-no-mikoto then

set out from Mount Miwa and wandered for 20 years in search of a suitable location. When she arrived at Ise, she heard the voice of Amaterasu telling her that she wanted to live there forever, near the mountains and the sea. It was here that Yamatohime-no-mikoto established the Inner Shrine.

Empress Jingu (169 - 269 CE) was the primary consort of Prince Tarashi nakatsu or Emperor Chuai, the 14th ruler of the Yamato state and, after his early death, regent to her young son Prince Homuta wake, who later became Emperor Ojin, the 15th ruler. Book nine of *Nihon shoki* is exclusively dedicated to her regency, and the Kojiki chapter on Chuai focuses on her achievements, rather than that of her husband.

The most popular story about the Empress Jingu is that the divine spirits, including Amaterasu and gods of the Sumiyoshi Shrine, possessed Jingu and told Emperor Chuai not to attack Kumaso in southern Kyushu, but to seek control of Silla, a land of gold, silver and other colorful goods on the Korean peninsula. Although he refused to obey

and died soon afterwards, the gods promised Jingu that Silla would be given to Chuai's son to whom she would soon give birth. Jingu inserted a stone under her skirt to delay the birth of her child and led her ships to Silla, assisted by the wind-gods and fish of the sea. The king of Silla surrendered of his own accord and promised to send yearly tribute to Yamato.

Upon returning to northern Kyushu, Jingu gave birth to Prince Homuta wake. She passed away at the age of 100 after serving for many years as regent to her son, who later became Emperor Ojin.

Queen Seondeok of Korea

At the time of Queen Seondeok's birth, the peninsula known today as North and South Korea was divided into three kingdoms of Konguryo, Paekche and Silla. Silla, the southern kingdom, was considered the most cultured and the most peaceful of the three.

After the death of his uncle, King Chinpyong became the 26th ruler of Silla in 579 CE. A few years after Chinpyong became King of Silla, he and the queen celebrated the birth of their first child, a girl known as Seondeok. When Seondeok was seven, her father obtained a box of peony seeds and a picture of what the flowers would look like in bloom. When Chinpyong asked Seondeok what she thought of the flowers, she remarked, looking at the picture, that the flowers were pretty but they did not smell and if they did there should be bees and butterflies around them, thus proving to her father that she was a clever girl with an insight of a potential queen.

Seondeok became Queen of Silla after Chinpyong died in 632 CE. As a ruler, Queen Seondeok's primary concern was the livelihood of her people. Right after she was crowned, she sent royal inspectors in every part of Silla in order to oversee the care and needs of the widows and widowers, orphans, the poor and the elderly who had no family to support them. In the second year of her reign, she also announced a whole year of tax exemption for the peasants and reduced the tax for the middle class. Through this act, the queen won the people's support and her position was strengthened against the opposition of the aristocracy.

Five years after her enthronement, the queen caused wonder among her people by defeating an invading enemy force with the help of frogs. On a certain day in winter, a number of frogs gathered together at the pond named *Okmun* (Jade Gate) and began to croak loudly for several days. When this strange phenomenon was reported to the queen, she immediately ordered two of her generals to lead 2,000 of her best soldiers to a valley named *Yeogeungok* (Cradle of Life) where an enemy force would be waiting, opening themselves for an ambush. The two generals led their armies to the valley and destroyed not only the detachment of 500

Baekje soldiers they found there, but also a force of 1,200 reinforcements which came later to aid them.

Seondeok's pleasure lay in the direction of the ancient practice of astronomy. As queen, she built the famous observatory *Cheomsongdae*. The observatory was made up of 365 pieces of cut granite, one for each day of the year. The base was made up of 12 stones. There were 12 stones below and above the windowsill, representing the 12 months and zodiac symbols. It was the first observatory in the Far East as well as the pride of South Korea.

Persecuting the Shamaness

The persecution of the women shamans and the destruction of their reputations had ancient precedents. Euripides casts Medea as an antagonist, turning her ram-rejuvenation into a ploy to convince the daughters of king Peleas to dismember and boil him. It was also Euripides who casts Medea as the murderer of her own children. Medea was therefore demoted from being a goddess granddaughter of Helios, and the high priestess of Colchis, to an evil witch.

A Manchurian epic, *The Tale of the Nishan Shaman*, talks about a woman, Nishan, who was the most powerful

shaman in the country. She was called upon to revive the son of a rich man after countless others had failed. She beat her drum and chanted as she journeyed to the ‘Otherworld’. In the underworld, she met *Omosi-mama* (the divine grandmother), the giver of souls and protectress of children. Omosi-mama ordained that Nishan would become a great shaman. Nishan then found the soul of the dead boy. However, her journey was not easy as she was also pursued by her long-dead husband who demanded to be saved as well. Nishan called for a great crane to seize him and throw him back into the city of the dead. When she came back to the upper world, Nishan was proclaimed a heroine and showered with riches. However, she later faced repression from Confucian authorities who accused her of not being an obedient wife. They also burned her drum and shamanic regalia.

In the Philippines, Spanish colonials persecuted women shamans. Not only did they persecute them by destroying their shrines and sacred objects, they also launched a campaign to destroy their reputations by calling them ‘devil-ridden old women’ and ‘witches’. José de Acosta (1540 -1600) wrote of the Peruvian witches, describing them as mostly shapeshifting old women who could journey through the skies and foretell the future. The Peruvian Inquisition also forbade seeking knowledge through dreams or signs in the sky or through vision quests. Thus, slowly and painfully, the perceived ‘value’ of women shamans was reduced until they faded in history.

DAOIST

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ALCHEMY

Hallucinogens in Ancient China

BY DR IOANNIS SYRIGOS

In the mist-shrouded mountains of ancient China, where the veil between the physical and spiritual worlds seemed thin, Daoist alchemists pursued a dream as timeless as humanity itself: immortality. These seekers were not mere dreamers but visionaries who wove together science, philosophy, and mysticism in their quest to transcend mortal limitations. At the heart of their practice was the creation of elixirs - potent concoctions believed to grant eternal life and spiritual enlightenment. Among the most intriguing ingredients were hallucinogenic plants, revered for their ability to unlock visions, connect practitioners with divine realms, and align them with the Dao, the cosmic force underlying all existence. This article explores the captivating role of psychoactive herbs in Daoist alchemy, their preparation, their spiritual and medicinal significance, and their enduring legacy in Chinese culture.

The Mystical World of Daoist Alchemy

Daoist alchemy, known as *liandan shu* (the method for refining cinnabar), emerged around the 2nd century BCE, deeply rooted in the philosophy of Daoism, as articulated by legendary figures like Laozi, the sage credited with the *Daodejing*.

> The alchemists' goal was not merely to extend physical life but to transform the practitioner into a xian (immortal), a being who could ascend to the heavens and commune with deities.

/ AdobeStock

This philosophy emphasized living in harmony with the Dao, a principle of balance and flow that governs the universe. Alchemy was a practical expression of this worldview, blending empirical observation with spiritual aspiration.

The practice is divided into two branches: Waidan, or external alchemy, and Neidan, or internal alchemy. Waidan focused on creating physical elixirs from minerals, metals, and plants, aiming to produce the *jindan* (Golden Elixir), a mythical substance believed to confer immortality. Neidan, by contrast, emphasized internal cultivation through meditation, breathing exercises, and energy work to achieve spiritual transcendence without physical substances. While Neidan gained prominence later, Waidan was the dominant practice in early Daoism, and it is here that psychoactive plants played a pivotal role.

The alchemists' goal was not merely to extend physical life but to transform the practitioner into a *xian* (immortal), a being who could ascend to the heavens and commune with deities. This transformation required aligning the body and spirit with the Dao, often through altered states of consciousness induced by hallucinogenic plants. These plants were seen as sacred tools, bridging the mundane and divine, and their use was steeped in ritual and reverence.

Psychoactive Plants in the Alchemical Crucible

Ancient texts, such as the *Shennong Bencao* (Divine Farmer's Materia Medica) and *Mingyi bielu* (Supplementary Records of Famous Physicians), document a variety of plants used in Daoist alchemy for their psychoactive properties. These plants were carefully selected for their ability to induce visions, facilitate spiritual communication, and aid in the quest for immortality. Below is a detailed exploration of the key plants and their roles:

Plant Name	Scientific Name	Description and Use in Daoist Practices
Yunshi (Cloud Seed)	Caesalpinia decapetala	A versatile shrub with bright yellow flowers, yunshi was prized for its ability to "enable one to see spirits." Its flowers were used in elixirs to drive away evil spirits and summon divine entities when burned in water. Prolonged use was believed to induce somatic levitation and communication with spirits, though excessive consumption could lead to delirium.
Shanglu (Pokeweed)	Phytolacca acinosa	Distinguished by its red and white varieties, the red shanglu's toxic roots were boiled or brewed to treat parasitic worms and induce visions of spirits. It was widely used by sorcerers and alchemists, with the white variety's flowers associated with longevity when prepared as a delicacy.
Dama (Cannabis)	Cannabis sativa	Used in ritual censers, cannabis was burned to release psychoactive fumes that lightened the body and aided spiritual communication. It was possibly ingested with ginseng to grant foresight, and some believe it influenced the creation of sacred texts like the Shangqing scriptures.
Xiaojun (Laughing Mushrooms)	Panaeolus/ Pholiota spp.	These fungi, known for inducing uncontrollable laughter, were sought for their role in immortality elixirs. Their psychoactive effects were believed to open pathways to spiritual realms, aligning practitioners with the Dao.
Langdan (Henbane)	Hyoscyamus niger	A deliriant plant, langdan was used to induce visions and spiritual experiences, though its use was less common due to its extreme toxicity.
Fangkui	Peucedanum japonicum	Known for causing delirium in excess, fangkui was used to see spirits, often in combination with other herbs in alchemical concoctions.
Mantuoluo (Datura)	Datura stramonium	Likely introduced from India, Datura's flowers and seeds were used with cannabis as an anesthetic and for their hallucinogenic effects, possibly aiding in ecstatic rituals.

These plants were not chosen haphazardly. Each was selected for its unique properties, often tied to its appearance, habitat, or effects. For instance, yunshi's vibrant yellow flowers, resembling clouds, were seen as symbolic of the heavens, while shanglu's red roots were associated with vitality and the life force. Cannabis, with its ability to induce a sense of lightness, was thought to elevate the spirit toward transcendence.

The Art of Elixir Preparation

The creation of alchemical elixirs was a complex and sacred process, as detailed in texts like the *Book of the Nine Elixirs*, a foundational work of the Great Clarity (Taiqing) tradition. This process was not merely chemical but deeply ritualistic, involving several stages:

1. **Transmission of Knowledge:** Alchemical recipes were esoteric, passed from master to disciple in secret ceremonies to ensure their sanctity and accuracy.

2. **Sacred Space:** The alchemist established a purified ritual area, often in a secluded mountain setting, to align with the natural energies of the Dao.

3. **Auspicious Timing:** The compounding of elixirs was timed to coincide with favorable celestial alignments, enhancing their potency.

4. **Compounding the Elixir:** Ingredients, including psychoactive plants, minerals like cinnabar (mercuric sulfide), and metals like mercury, were meticulously combined, often heated in crucibles to create the elixir.

5. **Divine Offerings:** The elixir was offered to deities, accompanied by prayers and invocations, to imbue it with spiritual power.

6. **Ingestion:** The alchemist consumed the elixir in a ceremonial context, aiming to achieve physical and spiritual transformation.

For example, shanglu's red roots were boiled into a potent brew, while cannabis was burned in ornate braziers, known as *boshanlu* (magic mountain censers), to release its psychoactive fumes. Yunshi flowers were sometimes steeped in water and burned to summon spirits, a practice that required precise preparation to avoid toxicity. These rituals were not only about creating a physical substance but about aligning the practitioner's body and spirit with the cosmic order.

Elen Moulin/AdobeStock

The *Book of the Nine Elixirs* emphasizes that the entire process (transmission, preparation, and ingestion) constituted the alchemical practice. This holistic approach underscores the integration of physical and spiritual elements, with psychoactive plants serving as catalysts for transcendence.

Spiritual Transformation Through Altered States

The use of hallucinogenic plants was central to the spiritual goals of Daoist alchemy. These plants induced altered states of consciousness, which alchemists believed allowed them to commune with spirits, gain divine insights, and prepare for immortality. For instance, the *Mingyi bielu* records that cannabis seeds, when combined with ginseng, could grant "preternatural knowledge of future events," suggesting their use in divination. Similarly, xiaojun mushrooms, with their laughter-inducing properties, were thought to open pathways to spiritual realms, aligning the practitioner with the Dao.

These altered states were not mere hallucinations but sacred experiences, seen as a bridge to the divine. The *Baopuzi*, written by the renowned alchemist Ge Hong, describes elixirs as superior to other practices like meditation or exorcism, as they granted access to higher spiritual realms. The visions induced by plants like yunshi or shanglu were interpreted as encounters with deities or immortals, guiding the alchemist toward enlightenment.

Ancient texts, such as the Shennong Bencao (Divine Farmer's Materia Medica) and Mingyi bielu (Supplementary Records of Famous Physicians), document a variety of plants used in Daoist alchemy for their psychoactive properties.

Anecdotes from historical texts illustrate the allure of these practices. Ge Hong, a 4th-century alchemist, recounted tales of practitioners who, after consuming elixirs, achieved feats like levitation or communication with celestial beings. One story tells of Liang Hsu, who at seventy consumed the red fruit of the paper mulberry for a year, rejuvenating his body and gaining extraordinary abilities, such as writing in the dark and galloping horses at 140 years old before retreating to the mountains as a hermit.

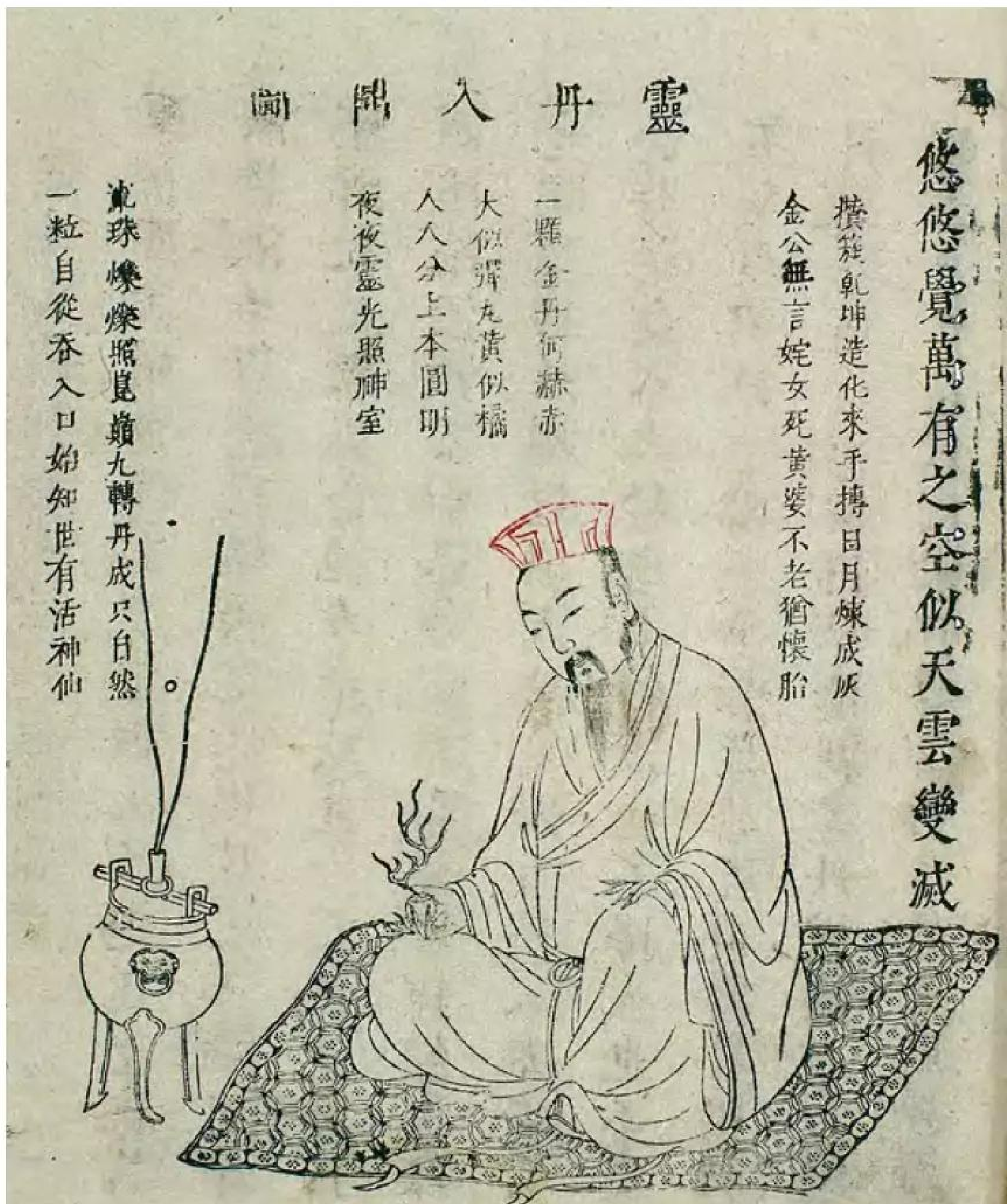
> These altered states were not mere hallucinations but sacred experiences, seen as a bridge to the divine.

The Symbolic Power of Ingredients

The ingredients used in Daoist alchemy were not only valued for their physical effects but also for their symbolic significance.

often found in sacred mountains guarded by spirits. The *Baopuzi* describes zhi (excrescences), which include mushrooms, as elusive substances that only the virtuous and wise could find, emphasizing their mystical nature.

The concept of zhi extended beyond mushrooms to other growths, such as rare plants or fungi, believed to possess miraculous curative powers. Alchemists ventured into sacred mountains during auspicious times, armed with talismans and offerings, to seek these substances. The search for zhi was as much a spiritual journey as a physical one, requiring purity of heart and alignment with the Dao.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人人分上本圓明
夜夜靈光照神室
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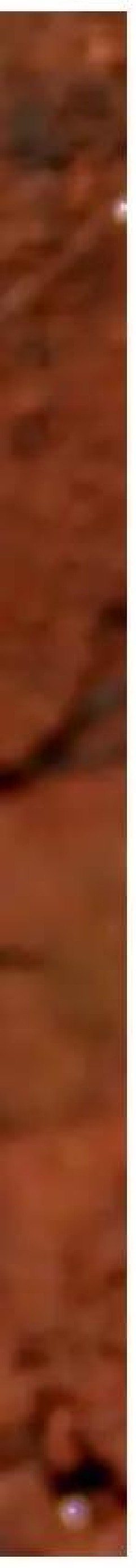
Chinese woodcut, Daoist internal alchemy. Wellcome



Cinnabar, a bright red mineral, was prized for its association with vitality and life, often considered the cornerstone of immortality elixirs. Its vibrant color mirrored the life force, making it a potent symbol of transformation.

Mushrooms, particularly the lingzhi (Ganoderma lucidum), held a special place in Daoist alchemy. Known as the “herb of spiritual potency,” lingzhi was believed to embody immortality and divine power. In art and literature, it was depicted as a symbol of longevity,

Risks and Controversies

The pursuit of immortality through alchemy was fraught with danger. Many ingredients, including shanglu's red roots and minerals like mercury, were highly toxic. Historical records suggest that elixir poisoning was a significant risk, with some practitioners suffering severe illness or death. Emperor Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, is said to have died in 210 BCE from ingesting mercury-based elixirs in his quest for eternal life, a stark reminder of the perils of Waidan.

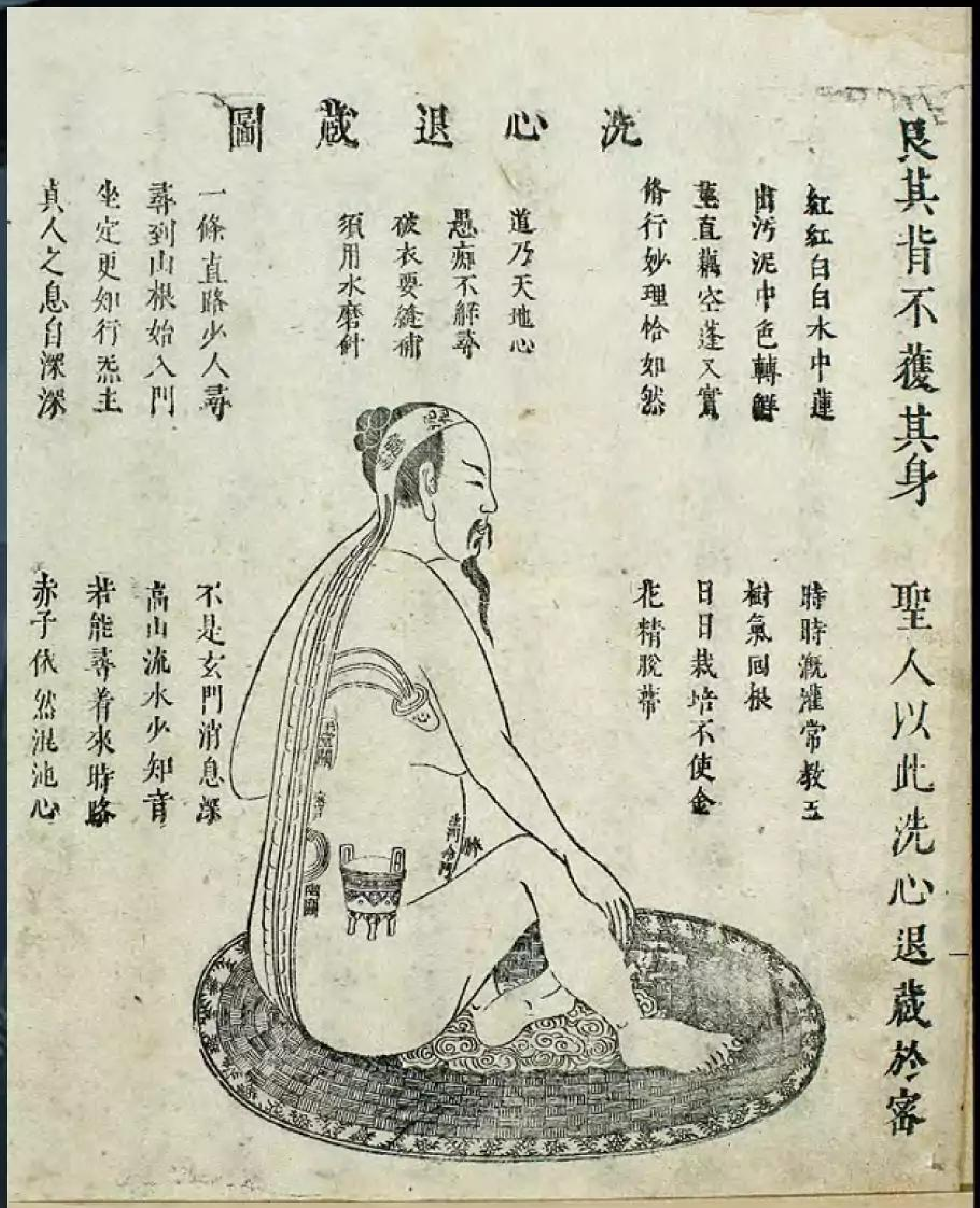
The use of psychoactive plants in Daoist alchemy was deeply intertwined with Chinese spiritual and medicinal traditions. Many of these plants were also valued in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) for their therapeutic properties.

These risks sparked debates among alchemists and scholars about the safety and efficacy of external alchemy. The *Baopuzi* warns of the dangers of improper preparation, noting that only those with deep knowledge and spiritual purity could safely navigate the alchemical process. Over time, the high incidence of poisoning led to a shift toward Neidan, which focused on internal cultivation through meditation and energy work, avoiding the physical risks of toxic elixirs.

This transition reflects a broader evolution in Daoist thought, as practitioners sought safer paths to spiritual enlightenment. However, the legacy of Waidan persisted, influencing later alchemical and medicinal practices.

Integration into Chinese Spiritual and Medicinal Traditions

The use of psychoactive plants in Daoist alchemy was deeply intertwined with Chinese spiritual and medicinal traditions. Many of these plants were also valued in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) for their therapeutic properties. Shanglu, for example, was used to treat inflammation and edema, though its psychoactive effects were reserved for spiritual contexts. Cannabis was employed for pain relief and mental health, with ancient texts noting its use for "mental illness."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脩行妙理恰如然
時時溉灌常教王
樹氣回根
日日栽培不使金
花精脫蒂
道乃天地心
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一條直路少人尋
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不是玄門消息深
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若能尋着來時路
赤子依然混沌心

Chinese woodcut, Daoist internal alchemy. Wellcome

Shamanic traditions, which predate and influenced Daoism, also utilized these plants. The *Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*, a text from the 4th century BCE, mentions the "hundred drugs" on Spirit Mountain, possibly including psychoactive plants and mushrooms. These shamanic practices, which involved entering trance states to communicate with spirits, laid the groundwork for Daoist alchemy's use of hallucinogens.

Among ethnic minorities in northern and southwestern China, such as the Oroqen and Tungusic Evenk, these traditions continue. These groups use plants like Mountain Climbing Juniper and Datura in shamanic rituals, preserving ancient knowledge and practices that echo the alchemical pursuits of their ancestors.

The Legacy of Alchemical Figures

The history of Daoist alchemy is rich with stories of legendary figures who shaped its development. The previously mentione Ge Hong is perhaps the most famous. His *Baopuzi* is a treasure trove of alchemical knowledge,

中國草藥功能
提昇身體免疫能力
維持身體精神健康
平衡身體能量

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detailing the preparation of elixirs and the spiritual disciplines required of practitioners. Ge Hong's accounts of immortals and their feats inspired generations of alchemists, blending practical advice with mystical lore.

Another notable figure is Tao Hongjing, a 5th-century Daoist master who compiled the *Mingyi bielu*. His work documented the use of plants like cannabis and yunshi, providing insights into their spiritual and medicinal applications. Tao Hongjing's contributions bridged alchemy and medicine, highlighting the interconnectedness of these fields.

Emperor Qin Shi Huang's tragic pursuit of immortality serves as a cautionary tale. His expeditions to find the elixir of life, including sending scholars to mythical islands, reflect the allure and danger of alchemical ambition. These stories, passed down through centuries, underscore the profound human desire to transcend mortality and the risks taken in its pursuit.

Contemporary Relevance

The legacy of hallucinogenic plants in Daoist alchemy persists in modern China, particularly among ethnic groups who continue to use psychoactive substances in shamanic healing. While contemporary Daoist priests rarely employ these plants, their historical use highlights the interplay between spirituality and pharmacology in Chinese culture.

Modern research into psychoactive plants and mushrooms is uncovering their potential therapeutic benefits, echoing their ancient uses. For example, studies on psilocybin mushrooms, similar to the xiaojun of ancient texts, suggest they may help treat depression and anxiety, paralleling their historical role in facilitating spiritual experiences. Similarly, cannabis is being explored for its medicinal properties, reflecting its long history in TCM.

The resurgence of interest in psychedelics has also sparked curiosity about their historical use in cultures like ancient China. Researchers are revisiting texts and archaeological evidence to uncover the extent of hallucinogen use, shedding light on the sophisticated knowledge of ancient alchemists. This intersection of ancient wisdom and modern science offers a fascinating glimpse into the enduring power of these plants.

vetre / AdobeStock

psychedelic

traditions in Ancient India

BY DR IOANNIS SYRIGOS

Put yourself in the situation of being on a moonlit night in ancient India, where there are priests sitting round the fire, reciting ancient Rigvedic chants, an ancient compendium of sacred books which is more than 3,000 years old. Central to the ceremony is Soma, a mysterious drink which is said to give immortality, godlike wisdom, and union with the gods. Mentioned in the form of both god and drink, Soma was the focus of Vedic ritual, but what exactly it was is still a great, historic unknown. Was it some kind of psychedelic agent which altered the mind, something else entirely, or something in between? And how else did the ancient Indians use plants to explore the realms of the spirit?

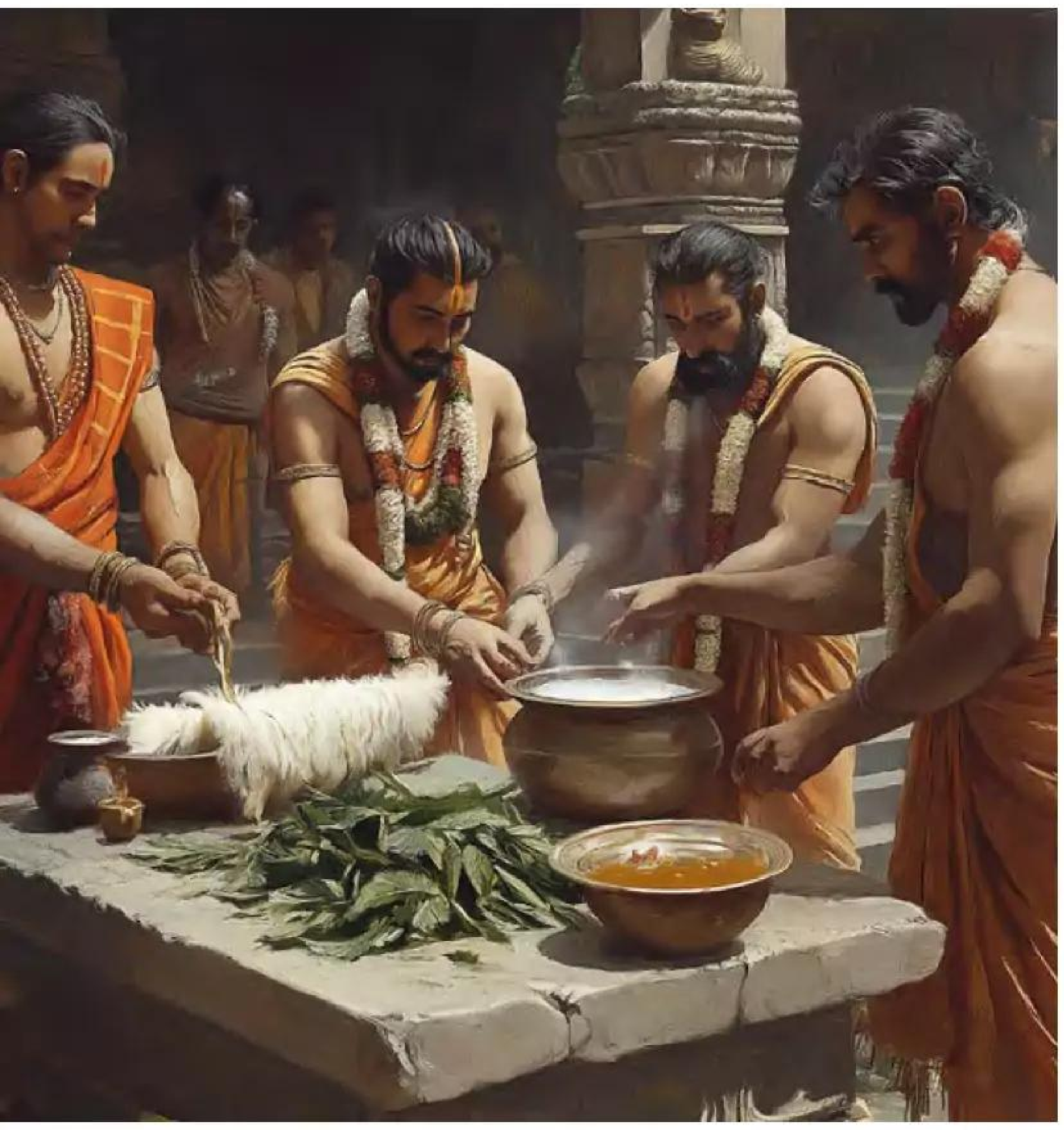
Let me take you on a journey through the psychedelic cultures of ancient India, from the mysterious Soma to other mind-benders like cannabis, datura, and possibly psychoactive mushrooms, all embedded in the religiosity of the time.

What Was Soma?

In ancient India, Soma was something more than just a drink – a sacred sign, a god, and a component of Vedic rites. Hinduism's oldest surviving text, the Rigveda, consecrates its whole Ninth Mandala, the Soma Mandala, to songs in praise of Soma (Soma (drink)). Written between 1500 and 2000 BCE, they portray Soma as if it were a herb whose juice is squeezed to produce some holy drink. Offered to gods such as the warrior god Indra and drunk by the priest, who felt it brought him closer to the divine, the juice of the Soma plant was prepared ritually. Besides its physical aspect, Soma also existed as a cosmic force, representing joy, wisdom, and spiritual strength.

Preparation and Ritual Use of Soma

Creating Soma was a careful and sacred process. The Rigveda describes priests pressing the plant's stalks between stones to extract its juice, which was then filtered through sheep's wool and mixed with water and milk.



This mixture was offered as a libation to the gods, with the remaining drink shared among the priests and the person performing the sacrifice, known as the sacrificer. These rituals, called Somayajna, were highly structured, emphasizing purity and precision. In modern South Indian versions of these rituals, a plant called Somalata (Cynanchum acidum) is used, though scholars debate whether this was the original Soma. The act of preparing and drinking Soma was believed to bridge the human and divine worlds, offering spiritual insights and divine favor.

Effects of Soma

The Rigveda paints a vivid picture of Soma's effects, describing it as a source of profound experiences. One famous verse, Rigveda 8.48.3,

> In ancient India, Soma was something more than just a drink – a sacred sign, a god, and a component of Vedic rites.

This suggests Soma made drinkers feel transcendent, as if they could touch eternity or connect with the divine.

declares, *"We have drunk Soma and become immortal; we have attained the light, the Gods discovered"*. This suggests Soma made drinkers feel transcendent, as if they could touch eternity or connect with the divine. Other hymns describe Soma as granting strength, joy, and wealth, enhancing both spiritual and physical well-being. For example, Rigveda 9.1 praises Soma as a "fiend-queller" and "granter of bliss," flowing to Indra to aid in battle. Some scholars interpret these effects as evidence of psychedelic properties, suggesting Soma induced visions or altered states of consciousness. Others, however, argue it was more of a stimulant or medicinal tonic, not a hallucinogenic.

The Mystery of Soma's Identity

The debate over where the plant Soma originated is centuries old. The Rigveda itself is suggestive, calling for a mountain-growing plant of yellow or tawny stalk possibly produced in the Hindukush Mountains. There are various contenders for the true identity of the plant, and for each there are advocates and sceptics.

One theory, put forward in the 1960s by R. Gordon Wasson, is that Soma was the Amanita muscaria mushroom with the red cap and the hallucinogenic properties. Critics, however, say its toxicity and method of preparing don't exactly live up to Vedic accounts. Another theory is the use of Ephedra, the stimulant plant containing ephedrine, which would fit the energizing properties for warriors of Soma (Soma of the Rigveda). Indian tradition sides with the use of the acid in Cynanchum acidum, but without psychoactive properties, doubts are raised. Others even propose Soma was an elixir of plants in which psychoactive compounds were combined for the complementary effect. Speculation is ongoing without the answer being clear, thus adding to the mystique of Soma.

Other Psychedelic Substances in Ancient India

Beyond Soma, ancient India embraced other plants with mind-altering properties, each playing a unique role in spiritual and cultural practices.

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Cannabis (Bhang)

Cannabis, known as bhang, has been used in India since at least 2000 BCE, as noted in the Vedas, where it's listed among five sacred plants (Cannabis in India). Associated with Lord Shiva, bhang was consumed to enhance meditation and spiritual connection, especially during festivals like Holi and Shivratri. It's often prepared as a drink, like bhang lassi, mixing cannabis with milk and spices, producing euphoria and altered perception. The 1894 Indian Hemp Drugs Commission Report found cannabis use to be ancient, religiously sanctioned, and harmless in moderation.

Datura

Datura, especially Datura metel, is a powerful plant whose hallucinogenic effects are caused by alkaloids such as scopolamine and atropine. It is also called "dhattura" in Sanskrit and is associated with Shiva and rituals like Shivratri and Ganesh Chaturthi. Datura is employed in small, pure doses in the medicinal practices of Ayurveda to address asthma, or for pains, but is toxic and thus must be carefully used. Its potential to create intense sight made the plant holy for the purposes of religion but also well known for the potential hazards.

Psychedelic Mushrooms

There is evidence to indicate the use of psychedelic mushrooms like the species of Psilocybe and Panaeolus in ancient India. The mushroom containing the

psychedelic agent psilocybin occurs in places like the Himalayas and the Western Ghats. Mushrooms are also seen in carvings of the Khajuraho Temples which approximate to 900-1130 CE. Indigenous peoples in the regions possess ethnomycological information, which indicates the use of mushrooms in religion, even if less documented in Vedic literature.

Other Substances

Sweet Flag (Acorus calamus): Used in Ayurveda to enhance meditation, it may have mild psychoactive effects.

Nutmeg: In large doses, nutmeg's myristicin can cause mild hallucinations, though it's primarily a spice and not traditionally psychedelic.

Conclusion

The psychedelic traditions of ancient India, from the mysterious Soma to the sacred use of cannabis, datura, and possibly psychedelic mushrooms, reveal a culture deeply engaged with exploring consciousness. These substances were not only for enjoyment. They were also sacred tools for connecting with the divine, enhancing rituals, and seeking wisdom. While Soma's true identity remains a topic of debate, its legacy, alongside other plants, highlights the sophistication of ancient Indian spirituality. As modern science rediscovers the potential of psychedelics for healing and growth, India's ancient practices offer an eternal perspective on their power to transform the mind and spirit. ■

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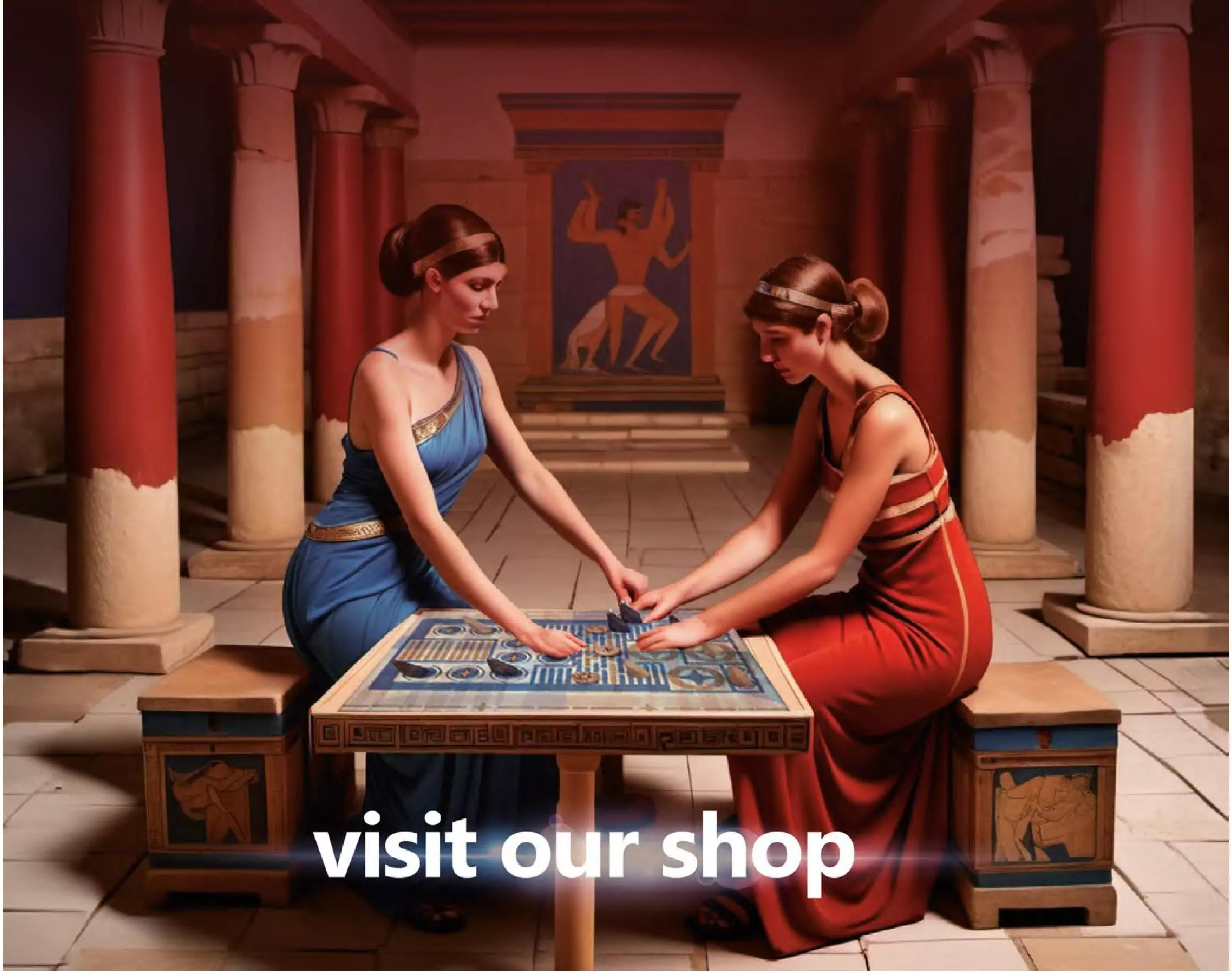


THE SOUND OF TRANCE

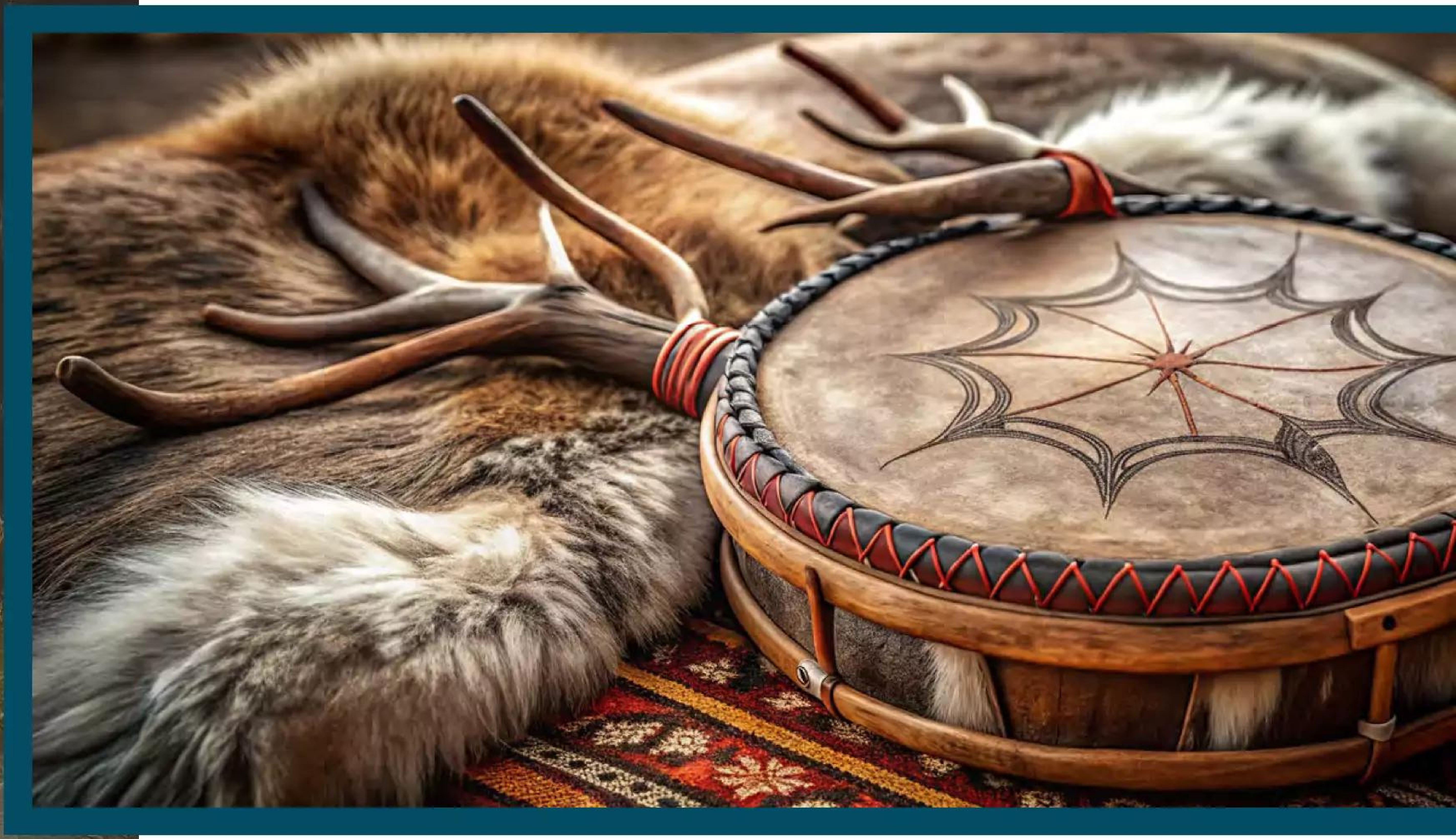
Shamanic Drumming Across Cultures

BY IOANNIS SYRIGOS

In the canvas of human history, few practices are as universal and enduring as shamanism. Across continents and cultures, shamans have served as spiritual guides, healers, and mediators between the physical and spiritual worlds. At the heart of their rituals lies a powerful tool: the drum. Its rhythmic pulse, steady and hypnotic, has been used for millennia to induce trance states, enabling shamans to embark on spiritual journeys. From the icy landscapes of Siberia to the vibrant communities of Africa and the sacred grounds of Native American tribes, the drum's beat resonates as a universal language of the spirit. The rhythmic drumming assists spiritual journeys in Siberian, Native American, and African shamanic traditions with its trance-inducing power and the cultural nuances that make each practice unique.

The Essence of Shamanism and Trance

Shamanism is a spiritual practice rooted in the belief that the natural world is alive with spirits, either ancestors, deities, or otherworldly beings, that influence human life. Shamans, often chosen through visions or hereditary roles, act as intermediaries, entering altered states of consciousness to communicate with these spirits. These trance states, described as journeys to a "non-ordinary reality," allow shamans to seek guidance, heal ailments, or retrieve lost souls. The drum is a cornerstone of this process, its repetitive rhythm serving as a vehicle to shift consciousness.



The trance state is a unique mental space, neither fully awake nor asleep, where the shaman's perception of reality transforms. Research suggests that this altered state is marked by increased activity in alpha (8-12 Hz) and theta (4-7 Hz) brainwaves, associated with relaxation, meditation, and dreamlike experiences. Drumming, with its steady tempo of 3-7 beats per second, aligns with these frequencies, making it an effective tool for inducing trance. This practice, while varied in its cultural expressions, is strikingly consistent across the globe, suggesting a deep, innate connection between rhythm and the human psyche.

The Science of Rhythmic Trance

The power of drumming to induce trance lies in a phenomenon called rhythmic entrainment, where the brain synchronizes its activity with external rhythms. Studies using electroencephalography (EEG) have shown that monotonous drumming at specific tempos increases alpha and theta brainwave activity, creating a relaxed yet focused state conducive to spiritual experiences. For example, a tempo of 180-250 beats per minute (3-4.17 beats per second) aligns with theta wave frequencies, which are linked to deep meditation and light sleep.

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This synchronization can lead to sensations of heaviness, decreased heart rate, and dreamlike visions, as reported in studies where participants listened to shamanic drumming.

Interestingly, the effectiveness of drumming may vary. One study found that suggesting a trance state could paradoxically decrease alpha wave activity in some participants, possibly due to cultural or individual differences in receptivity.
The physical act of drumming, combined with its vibrations, also plays a role, creating a multisensory experience that enhances the trance state.
In communal settings, the shared rhythm fosters social bonding, amplifying the spiritual experience. These findings highlight why drumming has been a preferred method for trance induction across cultures for thousands of years.

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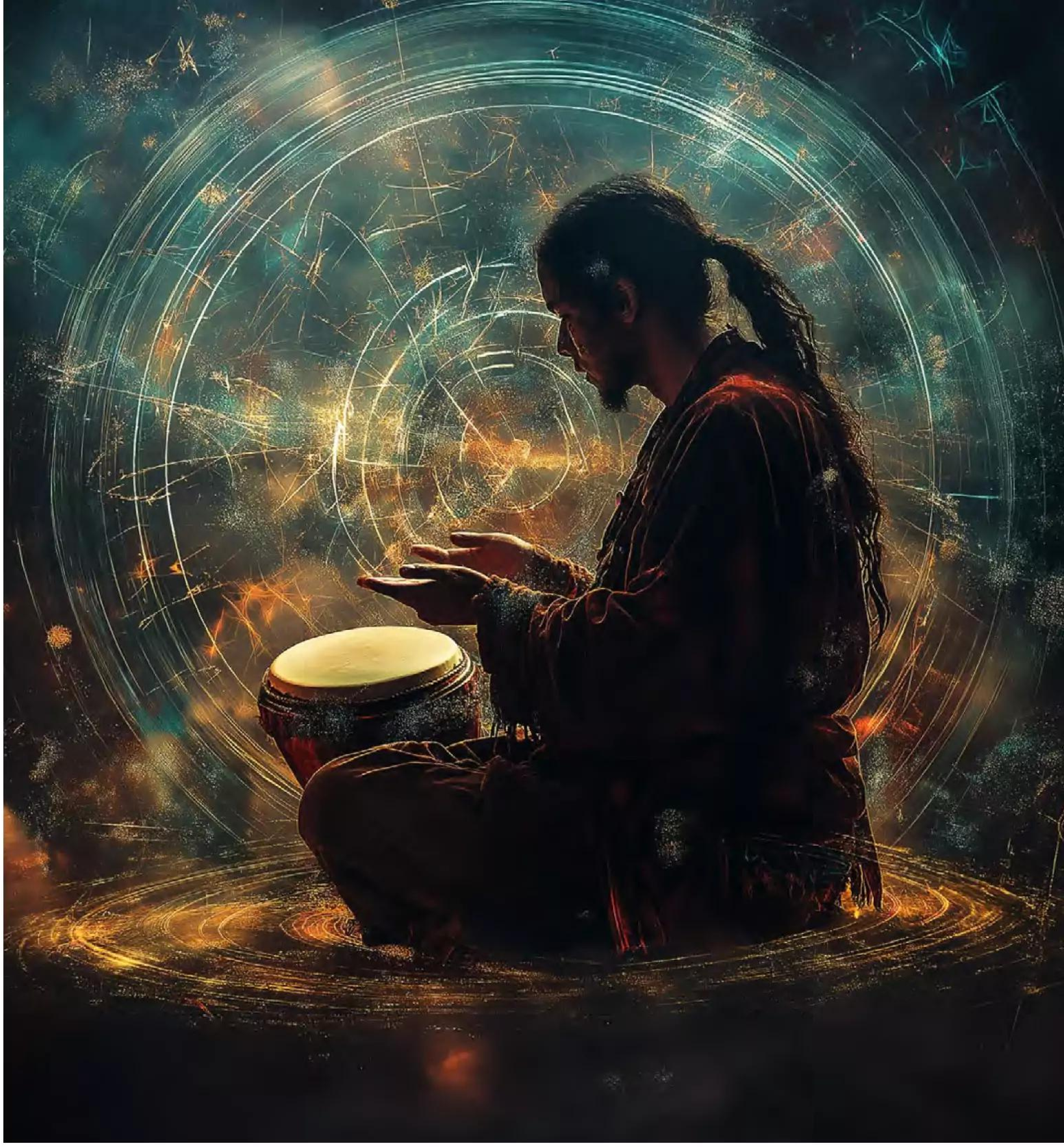
Siberian Shamanism: The Drum as a Spiritual Mount

In the vast, frozen expanses of Siberia, shamanism has thrived for millennia among peoples like the Evenki, Yakut, and Sámi. The drum, known as the “hese hengereg” in Mongolian traditions, is a sacred tool, often seen as a living entity with its own spirit. Typically large, ranging from 12 to 20 inches in diameter, Siberian drums are made from reindeer or goat hide stretched over a wooden frame, decorated with symbols representing the shaman’s spirit helpers or cosmological maps. Bells or metallic objects are often attached to the drum, creating a complex sound field that enhances the ritual’s atmosphere.



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In a typical Siberian ritual, such as the Mongolian “Hese Amiluulah” ceremony, the shaman begins by slowly beating the drum, the rhythm mimicking the galloping hooves of a spiritual mount. As the tempo increases, the shaman enters a trance, their spirit believed to ride this “horse” to the upper or lower worlds. The drum’s vibrations and the shaman’s movements, sometimes singing into the drum to create an otherworldly echo, amplify the trance state. For example, a Sakha shaman might use the drum to call upon the “Ayami” spirits, clearing their mind to receive ancestral wisdom. The drum’s role is not just functional but symbolic, representing a bridge to the divine.

Native American Traditions: The Heartbeat of Mother Earth

In Native American cultures, the drum is revered as a sacred instrument, often called the “spirit drum” or “heart drum,” symbolizing the heartbeat of Mother Earth. Tribes like the Tarahumara, Lakota, and Navajo craft frame drums from animal hides such as elk, buffalo, or moose, and then stretched over wooden hoops. These drums are used in healing ceremonies, vision quests, and communal

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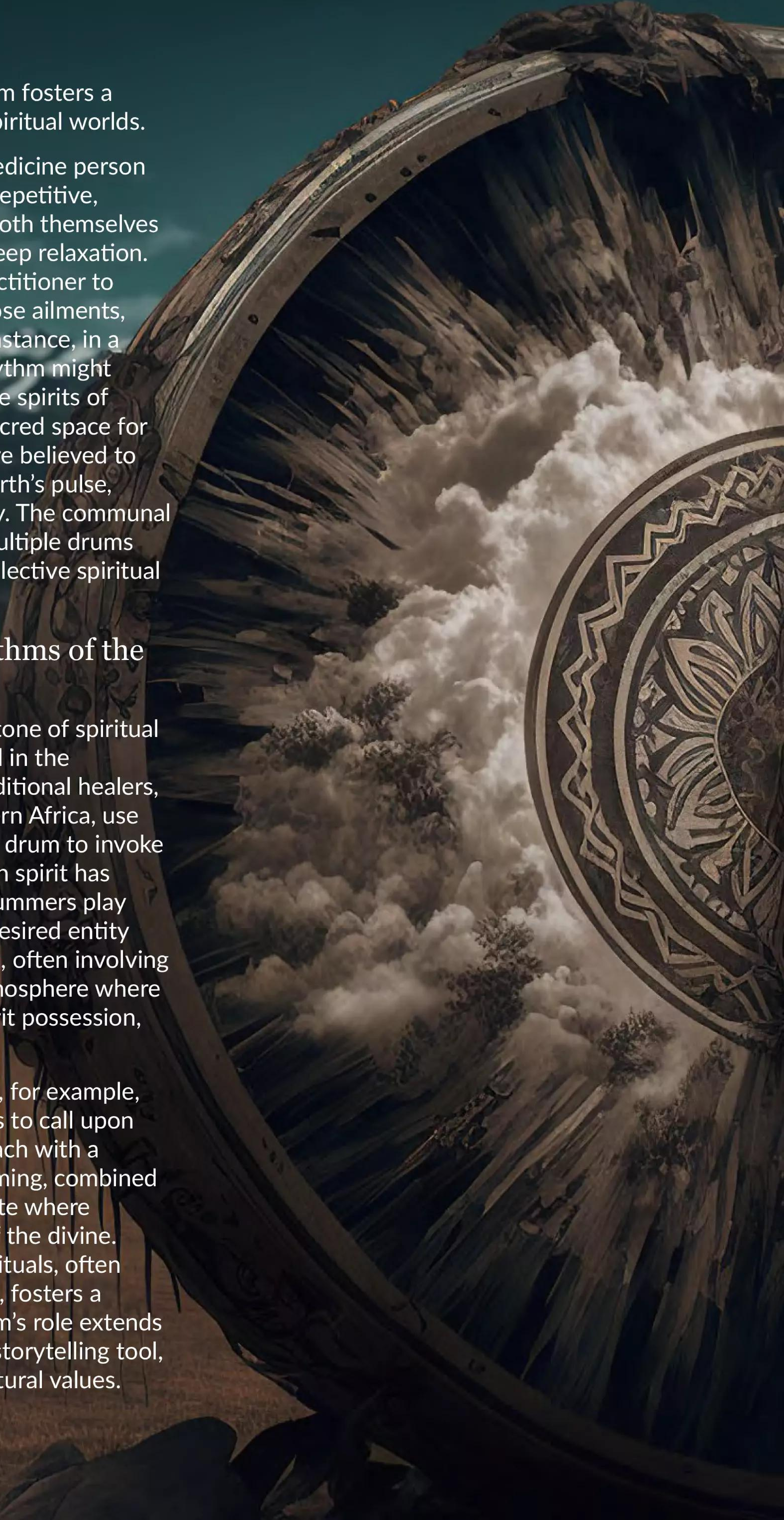
rituals, where their steady rhythm fosters a connection to the natural and spiritual worlds.

During a healing ceremony, a medicine person might use the drum to create a repetitive, heartbeat-like rhythm, guiding both themselves and the patient into a state of deep relaxation. This altered state allows the practitioner to access spiritual guidance, diagnose ailments, or transfer healing energy. For instance, in a Lakota ceremony, the drum's rhythm might accompany songs that invoke the spirits of the four directions, creating a sacred space for healing. The drum's vibrations are believed to align the community with the earth's pulse, reinforcing balance and harmony. The communal aspect of these rituals, where multiple drums may be played, enhances the collective spiritual experience.

African Shamanism: Rhythms of the Ancestors

In Africa, drumming is a cornerstone of spiritual and social life, deeply embedded in the continent's diverse cultures. Traditional healers, often called sangomas in Southern Africa, use drums like the djembe or talking drum to invoke ancestral spirits and deities. Each spirit has a specific rhythm, and skilled drummers play these patterns to summon the desired entity during rituals. These ceremonies, often involving dance and singing, create an atmosphere where participants may experience spirit possession, receiving messages or healing.

In West African Vodun practices, for example, drummers play complex rhythms to call upon spirits like Legba or Damballa, each with a unique drum pattern. The drumming, combined with dance, induces a trance state where participants feel the presence of the divine. The communal nature of these rituals, often held during all-night ceremonies, fosters a shared spiritual energy. The drum's role extends beyond trance induction; it is a storytelling tool, preserving oral histories and cultural values.



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The spiritual energy of the drum is believed to bridge the physical and spiritual realms, making it a vital instrument in African shamanic practices.

The Universal Power of Rhythm

The use of drumming to induce trance states is a remarkable thread that runs through Siberian, Native American, and African cultures, suggesting a universal human response to rhythm. Anthropologists note that the similarities in ritual forms, such as repetitive drumming, trance induction, and spiritual connection, are consistent across indigenous peoples worldwide, from Asia to the Americas. This universality may stem from the brain's innate response to rhythmic stimuli, as evidenced by studies showing drumming's impact on neural networks involved in attention and consciousness.

The communal aspect of drumming also plays a significant role. In group settings, the shared rhythm creates a collective energy that enhances the spiritual experience, fostering social cohesion and a sense of unity. Modern applications of shamanic drumming, such as drum circles and sound healing sessions, reflect this enduring appeal. Research indicates that

Larisa AI/ AdobeStock

drumming can reduce stress and boost immune responses, suggesting that its benefits extend beyond the spiritual to the physical and psychological.

Conclusion

The drum's rhythmic pulse has echoed through human history, serving as a powerful tool for spiritual exploration and healing. In Siberian shamanism, the drum is a spiritual mount, carrying the shaman to otherworldly realms. In Native American traditions, it is the heartbeat of Mother Earth, grounding communities in sacred rituals. In African cultures, it is a bridge to the ancestors, invoking spirits through precise rhythms. Across these traditions, the drum's ability to induce trance states through rhythmic entrainment reveals a profound connection between sound, mind, and spirit.

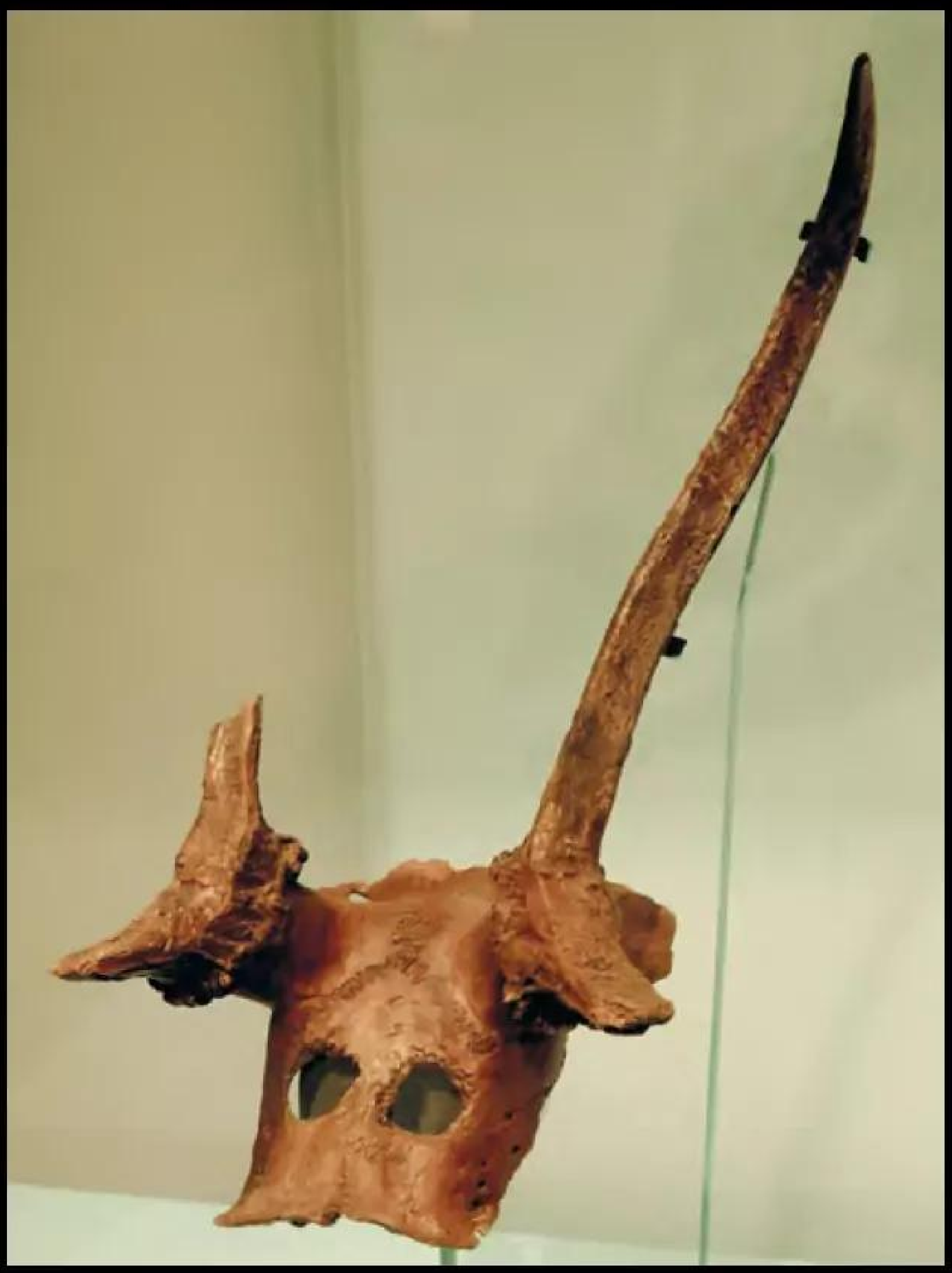
As modern science reveals the neurobiology of these old techniques, we have even greater respect for the wisdom of our ancestors. The drum, in its powerful simplicity, remains a presence in spiritual work today, providing an avenue to wisdom and connection. From Siberian yurt to Native American lodge to African village, the trance sound remains proof of continuing enchantment with rhythm. ■

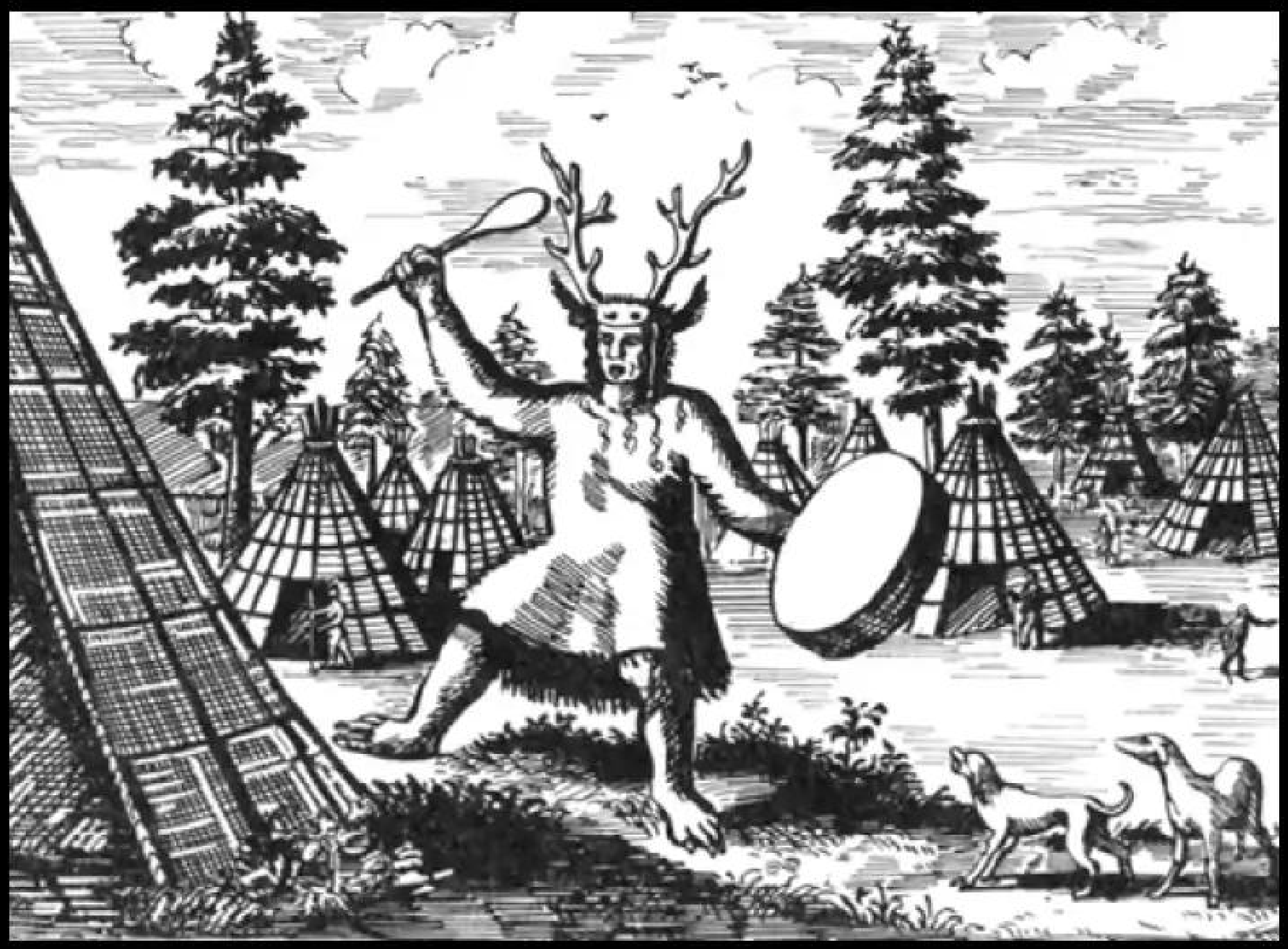
Spirits of the Forest:

Shamanic Deer Headdresses of Star Carr

By Gary Manners

Hidden beneath layers of peat and time in the once-misty wetlands of Lake Flixton in North Yorkshire, England, archaeologists uncovered a portal into the Mesolithic mind: 11,000-year-old deer skull masks believed to carry deep spiritual and shamanic significance. Found at the renowned Star Carr site, often hailed as Britain's most important Mesolithic location, these haunting artifacts are not merely remnants of ancient hunting gear-they may be sacred tools of transformation and communion with the spirit world.





The deer skulls, 33 in total, with three on display in the "A Survival Story - Prehistoric Life at Star Carr" exhibition at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, feature carved eyeholes and carefully modified antlers. Traditionally interpreted as hunting disguises, recent perspectives suggest these pieces were more than functional camouflage. Dr. Jody Joy, exhibition curator, notes that while the idea of hunters creeping through the woods in deer disguise may stir the imagination, "part of the antlers were removed... One suspects the deer wouldn't have been fooled!" (Haaretz, 2025).

This insight leads us away from utilitarian interpretations and toward a shamanic understanding - an animistic worldview in which masks were not worn to become hidden, but to become something else entirely. In this worldview, every stone, shadow, and breath of wind possesses spirit. To don a deer skull was not merely to mimic an animal, but to step into its essence, to blur the line between human and other-than-human.

Parallels with indigenous spiritual practices are compelling. In the Siberian tundra, shamans of the Tungus and Evenki peoples wore antlered headdresses during rituals, believed to bridge the visible and invisible realms. Similarly, among the contemporary Maya in Mexico, rituals like Loojil Ts'oon sanctify the hunt through ceremony, reaffirming a sacred contract between humans, animals, and divine forces (Santos-Fita et al., 2015). These rituals are performed not to dominate nature, but to seek permission from its spirit keepers.

Such practices likely go deep into the Paleolithic and Mesolithic past. The discovery at Star Carr, alongside wooden walkways, jewelry, and 227 antler points, hints at a settled, ceremonial space where rituals may have been performed to ensure balance between the hunter and the hunted. These were not merely survival strategies, but spiritual negotiations.

Understanding the Star Carr headdresses through this lens transforms them from ancient oddities to keys to ancient thinking. They are relics from a time when humanity danced not just across the earth, but between worlds. The deer masks of Star Carr are enduring relics from a time when human identity was fluid, sacred, and deeply entangled with the rhythms of the natural world. ■

TIME MAPS: MESOPOTAMIA

BY MARTINI FISHER

Written with a Mathematician's precision and a Historian's curiosity, "Time Maps: Mesopotamia" discusses the culture and people of Mesopotamia who produced some of the fundamental mindsets that we still very much recognize today, as well as the innovations that they created. One of our forgotten cultural ancestors, our inheritance from Mesopotamia is vastly greater than can be erased by centuries of philosophical and moral debates.

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TIME MAPS:
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Warriors and Kings:

The 1500 Year Battle for Celtic Britain

By Martin Wall

The story of the centuries-long resistance of the indigenous peoples of Britain, to the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Normans and English. How did the Celtic tribes and nations survive against overwhelming odds for so long? This is the story of their gallant struggle, led by some of the most enduring heroes of history and myth – Caratacus, Boudica, Cadwallon, Llewelyn 'the Last', Owain Glyndwr – and of course, Arthur.

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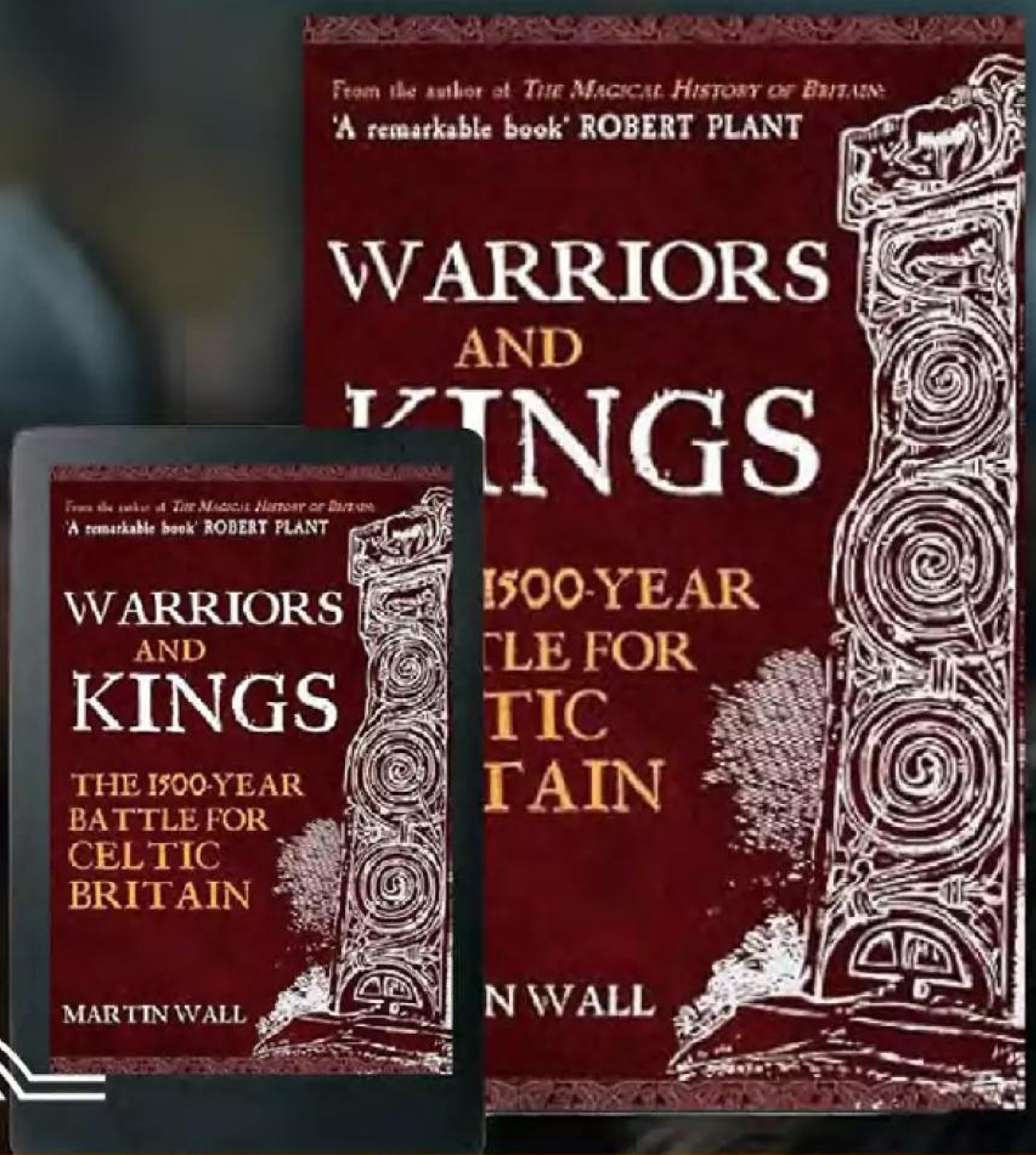

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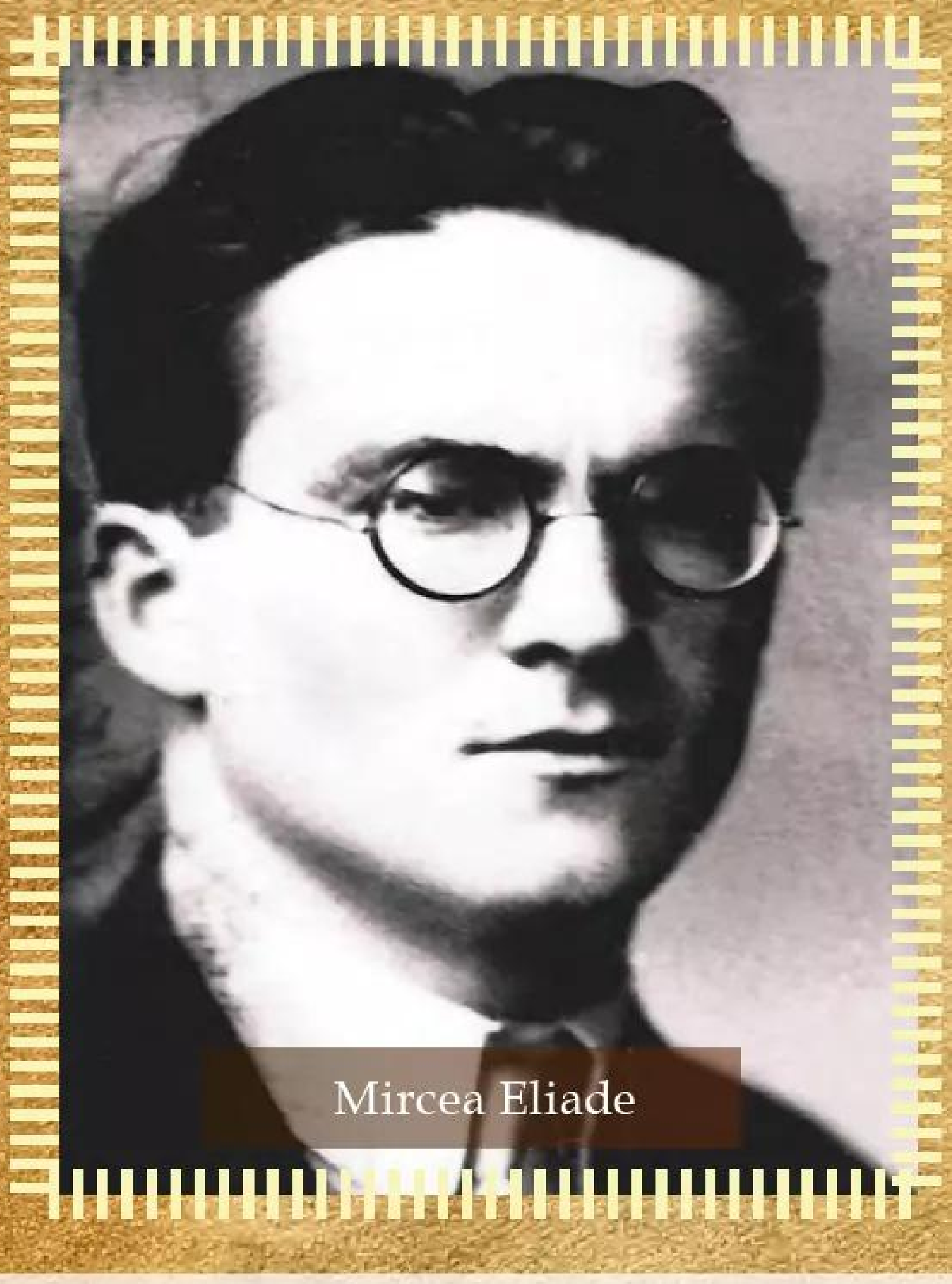
MIRCEA ELIADE ARCHITECT OF THE SACRED AND CHRONICLER OF THE SHAMAN'S JOURNEY

By Nathan Falde



Mircea Eliade

In a world increasingly defined by materialism and rationalism, few figures have illuminated the sacred dimension of human experience as powerfully as Mircea Eliade. A polymath of staggering range - historian, novelist, philosopher, and noted historian of religion - Eliade carved out an intellectual legacy that continues to resonate across disciplines. Best known for his exploration of myth, symbol, and the experience of the sacred, he also helped catapult the study of shamanism into the global consciousness.

Today his vision of a world soaked in meaning, where the sacred pulses beneath the surface of everyday life, feels more urgent and vital than ever.

From Bucharest to Benares: The Making of a Seeker

Born in 1907 in Bucharest, Romania, Mircea Eliade was a precocious youth, fluent in multiple languages and captivated by science, myth, and the occult in equal measure. But it was his journey to India in 1928 that would transform the curious student into a lifelong seeker of spiritual meaning.

At the University of Calcutta, Eliade studied under the great Sanskritist, Surendranath Dasgupta. Immersed in Hindu philosophy, Tantra, and Yoga, he didn't merely observe Indian thought, he absorbed it. His stay culminated in a doctoral dissertation on Yoga, later published as Yoga: Immortality and Freedom, a foundational text that framed yogic practice not merely as physical discipline but as a metaphysical path to transcendence.

This formative experience left Eliade with a profound conviction: that premodern societies were not primitive but deeply attuned to the sacred, and that religious symbolism contained profound truths about the human condition. It also birthed a lifelong mission to decode those symbols and bring them into dialogue with the modern world.

Mapping the Sacred: A New History of Religion

As the Nazis rose to power, they tEliade's later academic work, especially after his appointment as Chair of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago in 1956, redefined how religion was studied in the West. He rejected purely sociological or reductionist interpretations. For Eliade, religion was not merely a cultural artifact, it was a window into the soul of humanity.

Lila Patel / AdobeStock

In landmark works such as The Sacred and the Profane (1957) and The Myth of the Eternal Return (1949), Eliade argued that religious people orient themselves around sacred patterns and cosmic archetypes. Unlike the modern secular worldview, which sees time as linear and mundane, traditional societies live in cyclical time, reenacting mythic moments to reconnect with the sacred order.

At the heart of his theory was a simple but radical idea: the sacred is real, and it reveals itself through hierophanies - manifestations of the divine in the world. A sacred mountain, a symbol, or a ritual is not just metaphorical for the traditional mind; it is the presence of the divine.

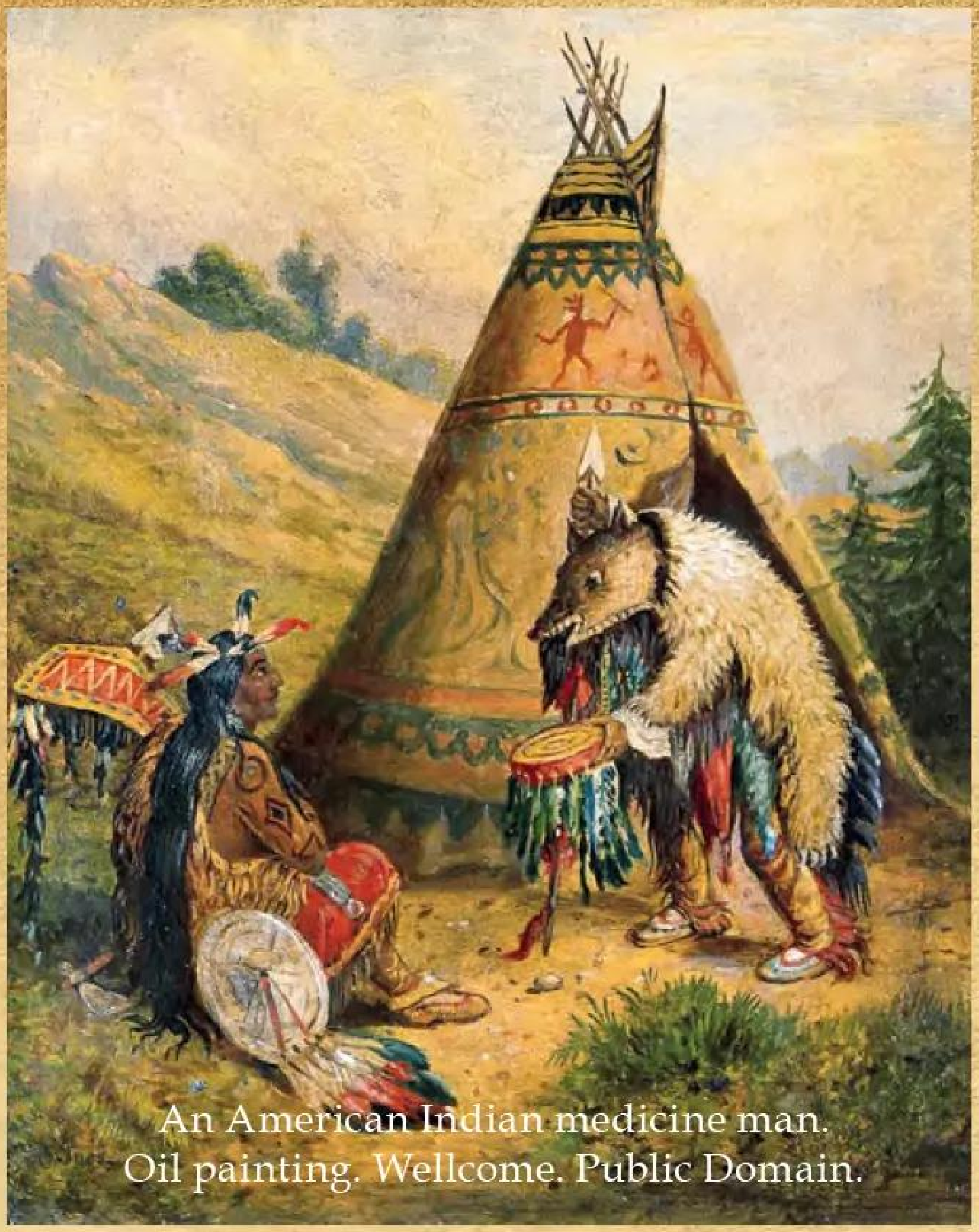
This phenomenological approach (studying religious experience from the inside, on its own terms) made Eliade a towering figure in religious studies, even as critics challenged his tendency to generalize or essentialize.

A Dogon Ritual.

The Shaman as World-Walker

Perhaps no subject fired Eliade's imagination more than shamanism. In his magnum opus, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy (1951), he surveyed traditions from Siberia, Central Asia, North America, and beyond, searching for the unifying core of what he called the "archaic mystic."

For Eliade, the shaman is not just a healer or tribal technician. He is a traveler between worlds, an individual who undergoes



An American Indian medicine man. Oil painting. Wellcome. Public Domain.

initiation through death and rebirth, gains access to hidden realms, and returns bearing wisdom and power. The shaman's ecstatic journey - often induced by drumming, fasting, or trance - is not a hallucination but a cosmic ascent, echoing the ancient motifs of the world tree, axis mundi, and flight of the soul.

The shaman, Eliade wrote, is "one of the earliest magico-religious functionaries of human society," and perhaps its first mystic. What fascinated him most was that shamanism, in one form or another, predated all organized religion and remained astonishingly consistent across cultures. This made it a kind of spiritual fossil, a glimpse into the deep structure of the religious mind.

Modern anthropologists have since taken issue with Eliade's universalizing tendencies, pointing out that shamanic practices are culturally specific and often deeply political. But even his critics acknowledge the sheer scale of Eliade's achievement: he rescued shamanism from obscurity and established it as a central category in the study of religion.

A Legacy in Light and Shadow

Mircea Eliade's legacy is both towering and complex. On one hand, he gave the study of religion a new dignity and depth, treating myth and ritual not as superstitious relics but as serious expressions of human experience. He saw in every religious symbol a cipher, waiting to be decoded by those attuned to the language of the sacred.

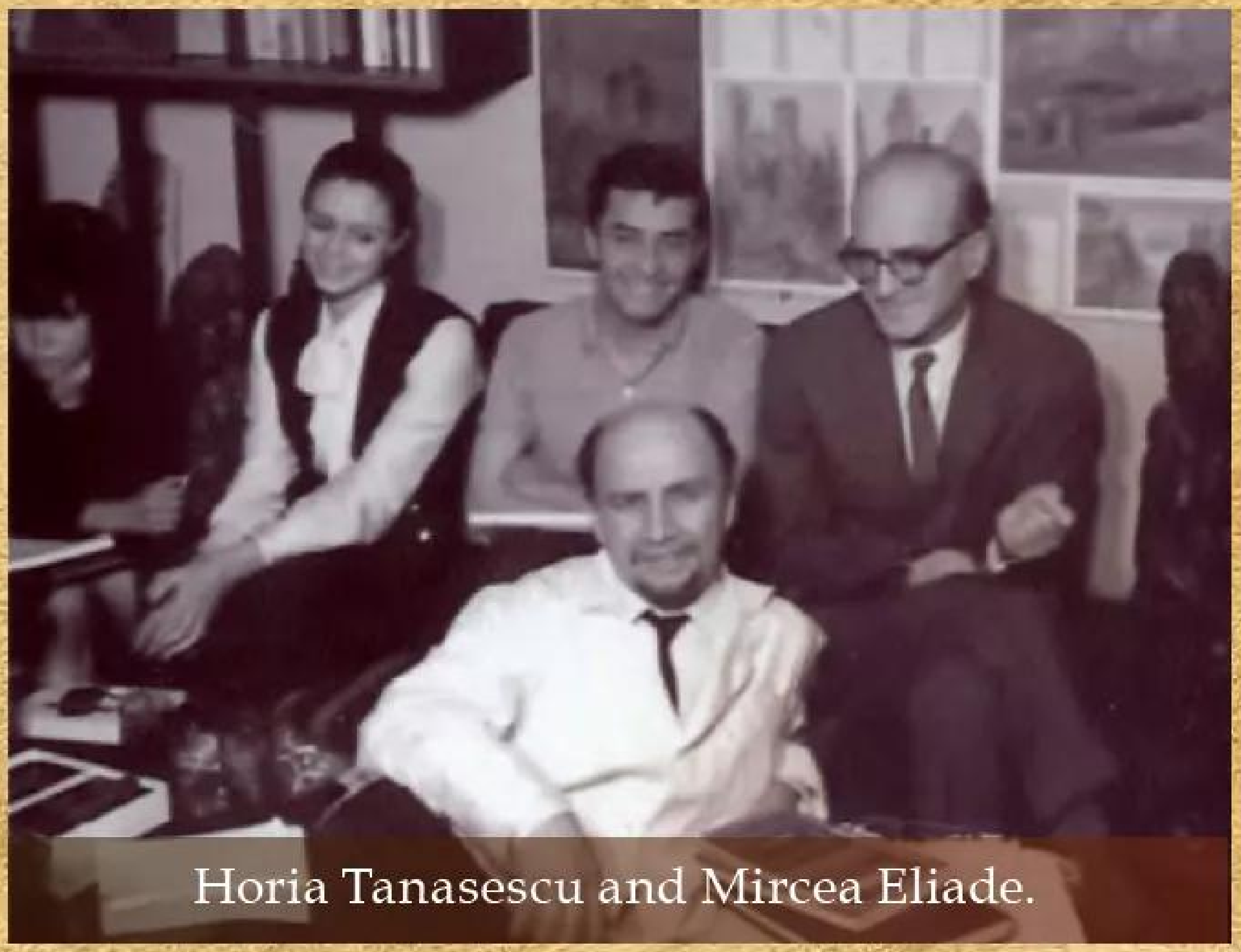
His work influenced not only theologians and historians, but also psychologists like Carl Jung, artists, and seekers in the New Age movement, who found in Eliade's vision a legitimization of spiritual experience outside institutional religion.

On the other hand, Eliade's personal affiliations with far-right Romanian nationalism in the 1930s have cast a shadow over his reputation, prompting ongoing debates about the relationship between ideology and scholarship. While he later distanced himself from politics, the ethical questions surrounding his early years remain part of his intellectual biography.

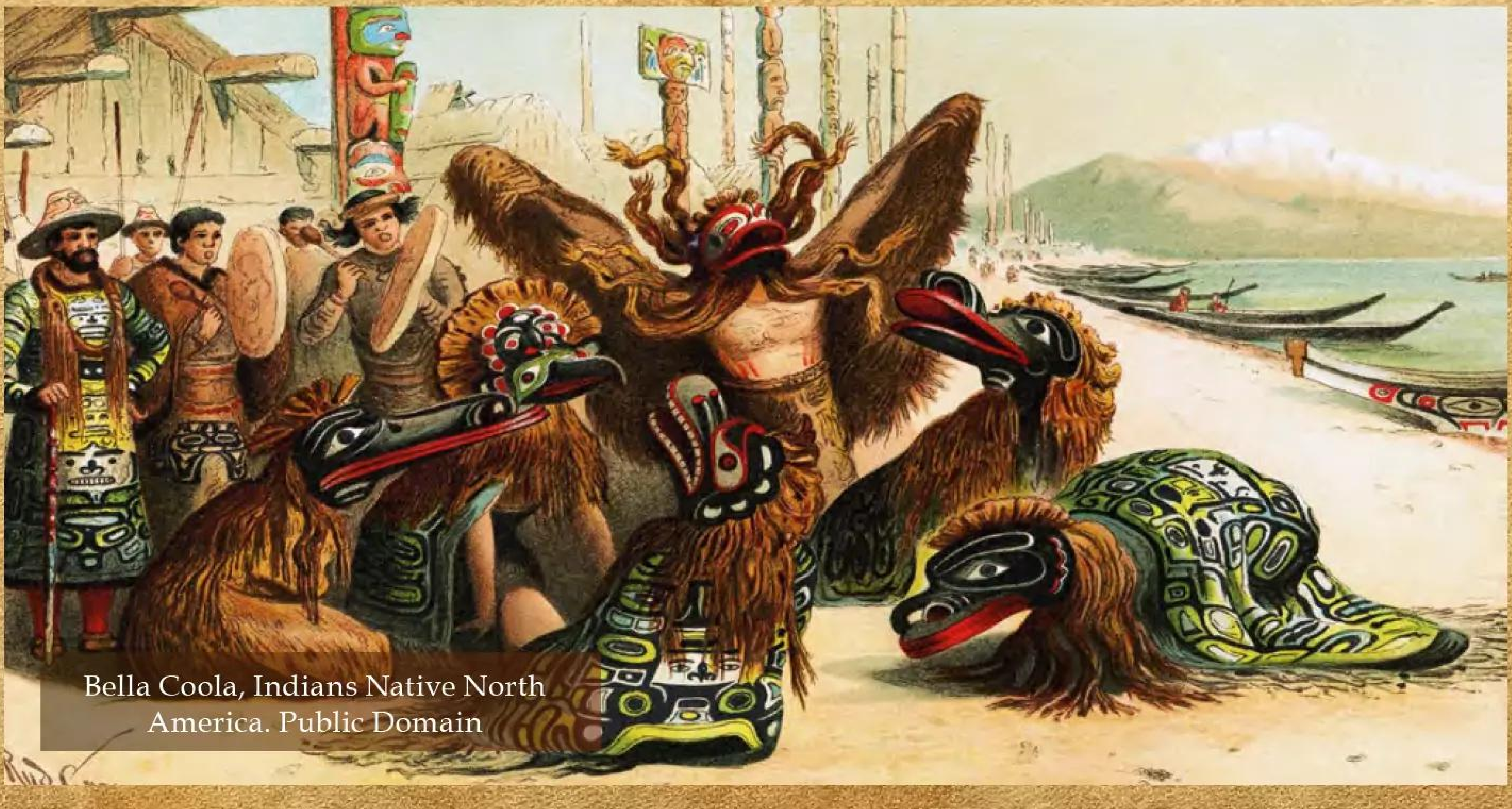
More than a scholar, Eliade was a cartographer of the soul, charting the hidden pathways by which ancient peoples (and modern individuals) seek meaning, healing, and transcendence. In an age where the sacred is often silenced beneath layers of rationalism and consumerism, Eliade's work offers a radical proposition: that the longing for sacredness is not a superstition to be outgrown, but a universal structure of human consciousness.

The deer-masked shaman, the yogi lost in ecstatic union, the initiate reenacting cosmic myths; these, for Eliade, are not distant relics but living archetypes. They talk to us still, from the deep time of the collective imagination, calling us to remember a world where the divine was not distant, but intimately woven into the rhythms of earth and sky.

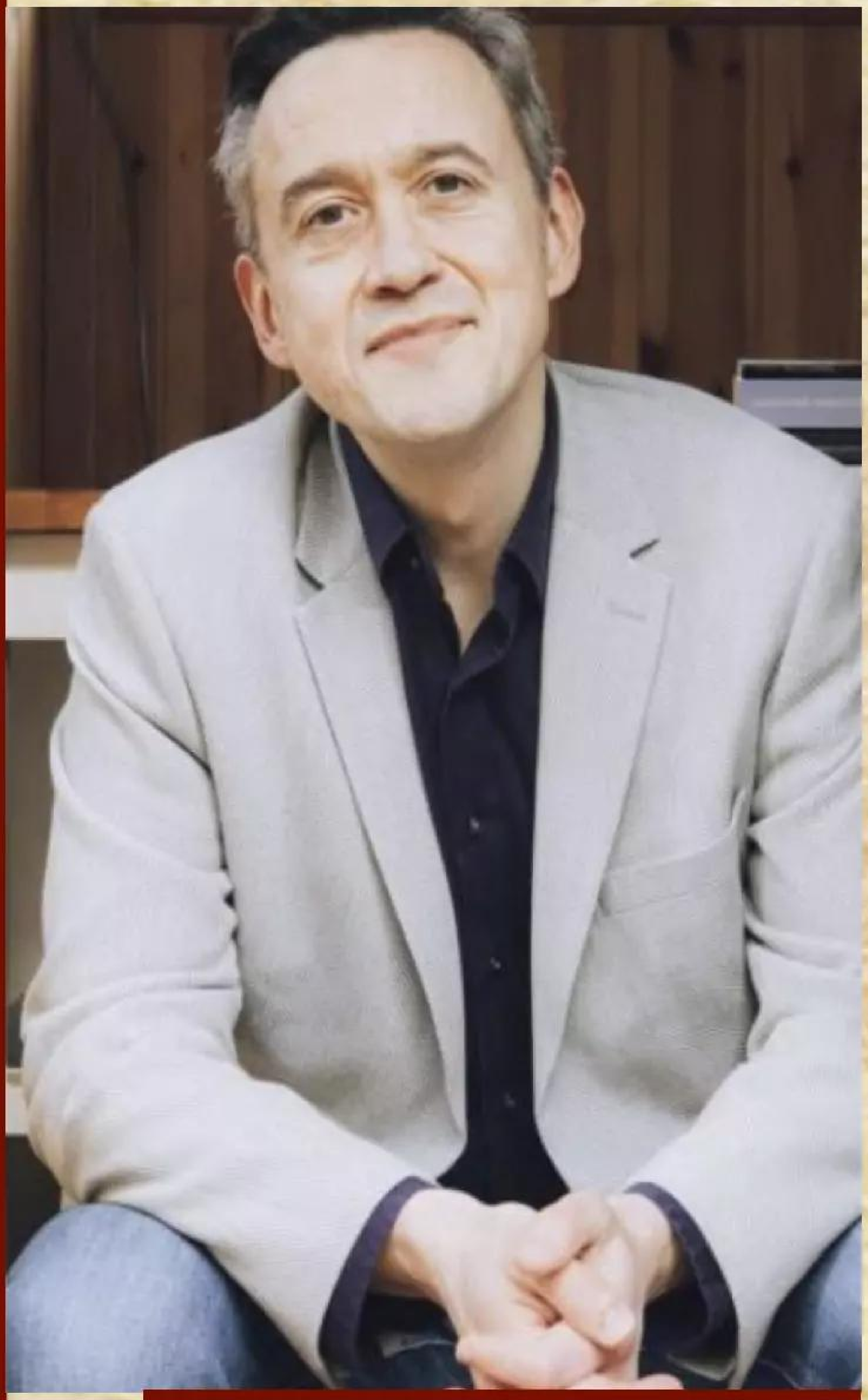
In Eliade's vision, the sacred is never far away. It is hidden in plain sight, waiting to be seen with mythic eyes. ■



Horia Tanasescu and Mircea Eliade.



Bella Coola, Indians Native North America. Public Domain



Courtesy of Christopher Harding.

Dr. Christopher Harding, a historian, broadcaster, and senior lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, specializes in the cultural and intellectual history of Japan, India, and Asia. Known for bringing complex histories to life, he is the author of The Japanese: A History in Twenty Lives and a regular contributor to BBC Radio 3 and 4. With expertise in myth, identity, and spirituality, Dr. Harding offers unique insights into one of Japan's most enigmatic figures: the shaman-queen Himiko.

Ioannis Syrigos: Who was Himiko, and what do historical sources like the Wei Zhi tell us about her?

Chris Harding: Himiko is the first named figure in Japanese history, a powerful ruler who lived around 170–248 CE. Known primarily through the Chinese Wei Zhi chronicle, she was a shaman-queen of the Wa people, ruling the chiefdom of Yamatai and overseeing several surrounding chieftains. At this time, Japan was not a unified country but a collection of communities across an archipelago. The Wei Zhi describes her as a formidable leader who maintained diplomatic relations with China, blending political, military, and spiritual authority. The term "Wa," used by the Chinese, was derogatory, implying "short" or

Dr. Christopher Harding on Himiko, Japan's Shaman-Queen
An Exclusive Interview

By Ioannis Syrigos

"dwarfish," reflecting their view of her people.

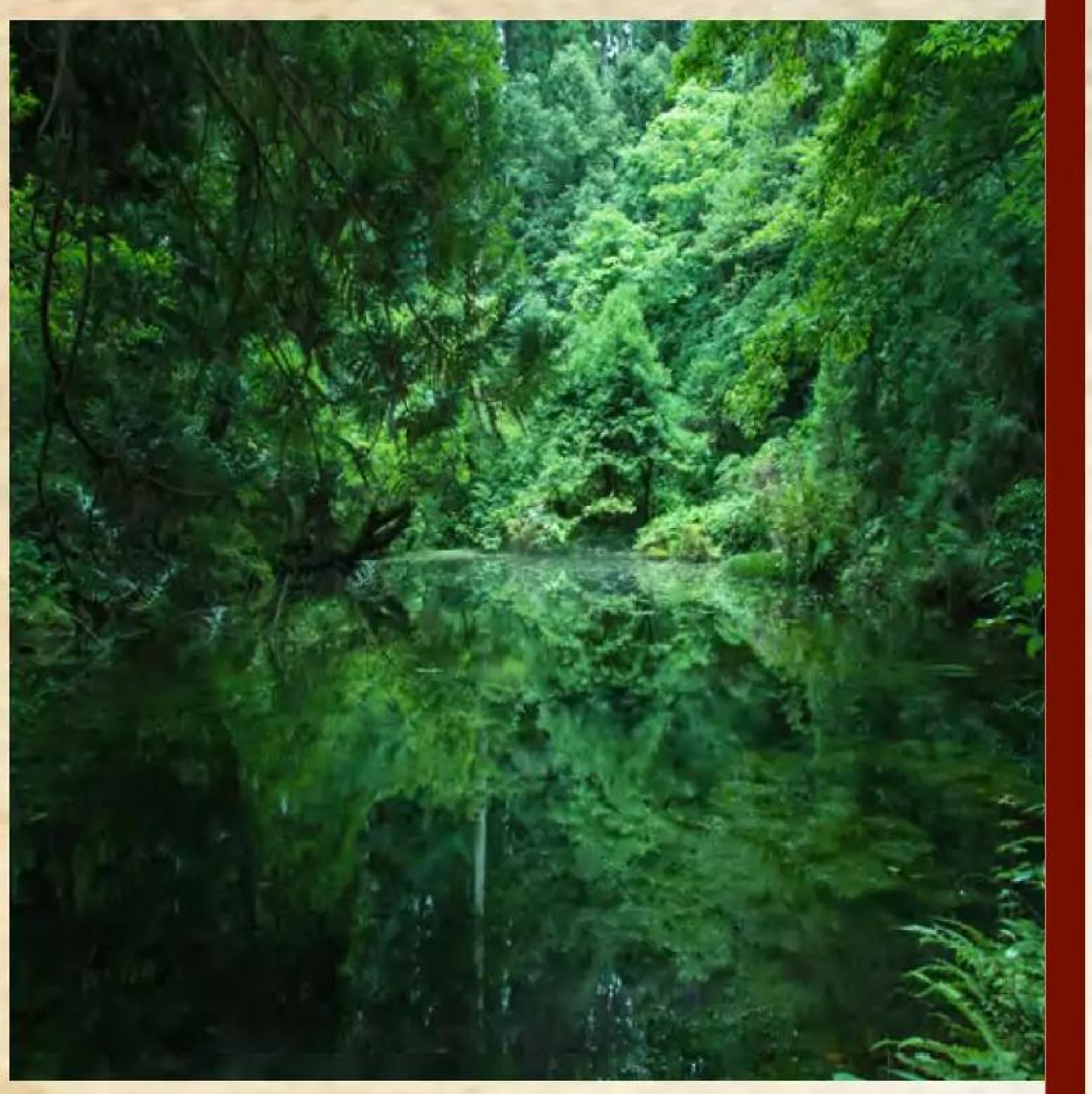
IS: Why is Himiko absent from early Japanese records?

CH: Japan didn't produce written records until the early 8th century, about 400 years after Himiko's death, when chronicles briefly mentioned her. The Wei Zhi, compiled closer to her lifetime, likely drew from accounts of Chinese envoys who visited or heard about her. Her significance lies in being Japan's first named historical figure, a woman who combined political and shamanic power in a predominantly male-dominated history. There's also speculation she might be an ancestor of Japan's imperial line, which traces back 1,500 years, making her a figure of enduring mystery.

IS: What was the political and cultural landscape of ancient Wa during Himiko's reign?

CH: The Wa society had a strong social hierarchy, evident in the Wei Zhi accounts of powerful men with multiple wives who commanded respect, such as passersby kneeling or crossing the street to avoid them. Wealth, derived from settled rice agriculture, was central, alongside bronze and ironworking techniques imported from China and Korea. Spiritually, leaders like Himiko conducted rituals at natural sites—waterfalls, mountains, or great trees—believed to hold supernatural power, reflecting a deep connection to nature.

IS: How did Himiko's shamanistic authority legitimize her rule?



CH: The Wei Zhi suggests Himiko's spiritual power was key to her authority. Unmarried and secluded in a fortified area with 1,000 female attendants and a single male intermediary, possibly her brother, she ruled through "sorcery" and "bewitching" her people. This mix of fear and awe stemmed from her perceived connections to the supernatural, making her both revered and intimidating in a patriarchal society. Her death led to chaos, and a male successor failed to command respect, underscoring her unique charisma and influence.

IS: How is Himiko portrayed in modern Japanese culture?

CH: In modern Japan, Himiko's image has evolved. During the late 19th century, as Japan modernized, figures associated with shamanism were seen as embarrassing relics. However, post-World War II, some Japanese embraced her as a symbol of peace and connection to nature, countering the country's militaristic past. This resonates in works like Hayao Miyazaki's films, such as Princess Mononoke, which feature young women tied to nature and the supernatural. Himiko now represents a harmonious, nature-centric ideal for some.

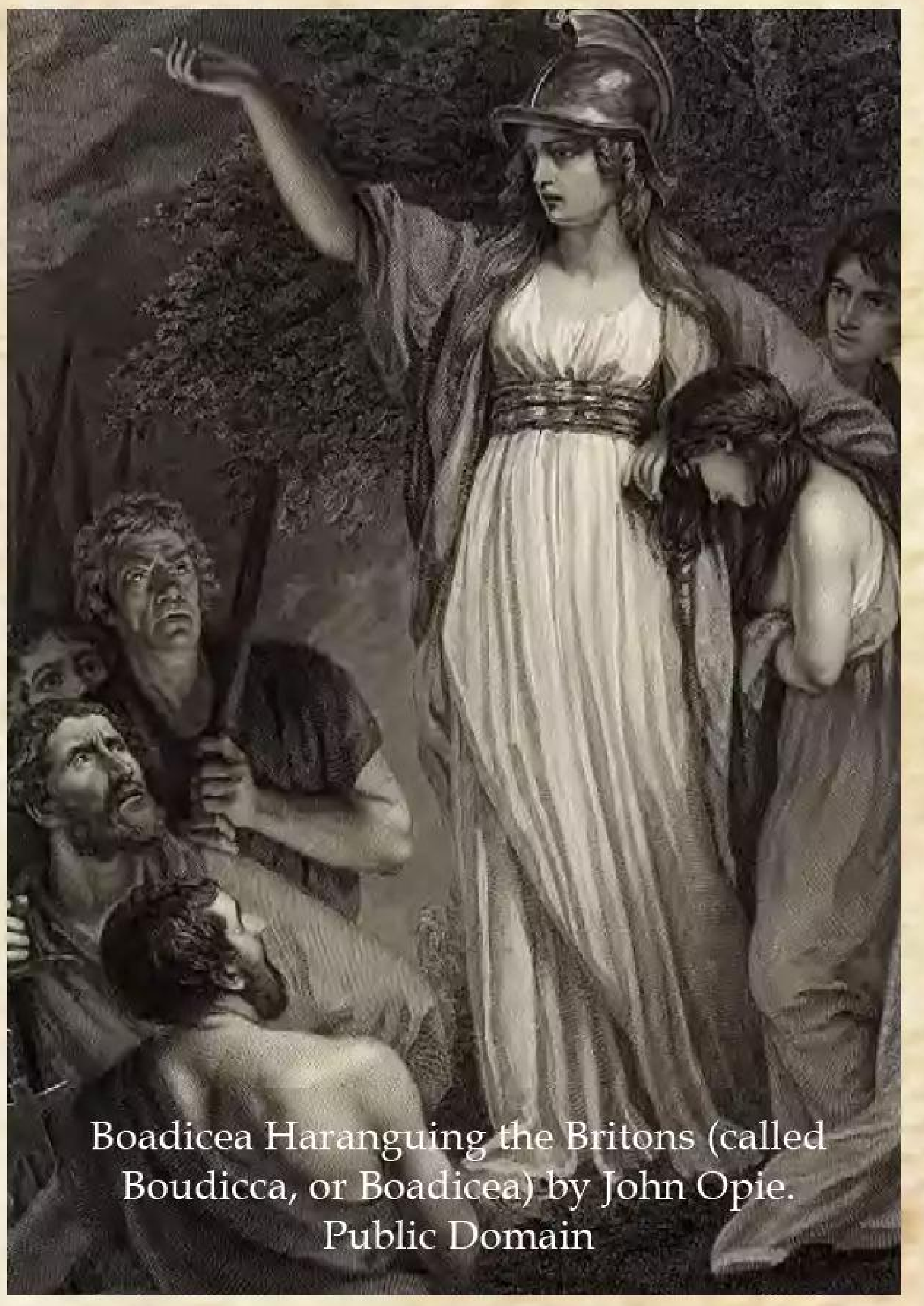
IS: Are there parallels between Himiko and other powerful female figures in history or mythology?

CH: Yes, parallels exist with figures like Boudica, a warrior-queen who led a rebellion against the Romans in Britain around a century before Himiko, operating in a male-dominated society. Another is the legendary Korean princess Kongsŏng, credited with spreading shamanism and linked to a royal bloodline. Both share Himiko's blend of spiritual and political power, and like her, they've been reimagined for modern feminist or cultural purposes.

IS: In Tomb Raider, Himiko is depicted as a queen with dark supernatural powers. Is this portrayal accurate?

CH: The Tomb Raider portrayal, while intriguing, leans into a dark and dangerous stereotype, possibly reflecting Western misconceptions of Japanese

religion as exotic or suspect, similar to depictions of Indian cults in films like Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. This oversimplification risks distorting Himiko's legacy, especially given the scarcity of prominent female figures in Japanese history. However, it may spark interest in her story, encouraging further exploration.



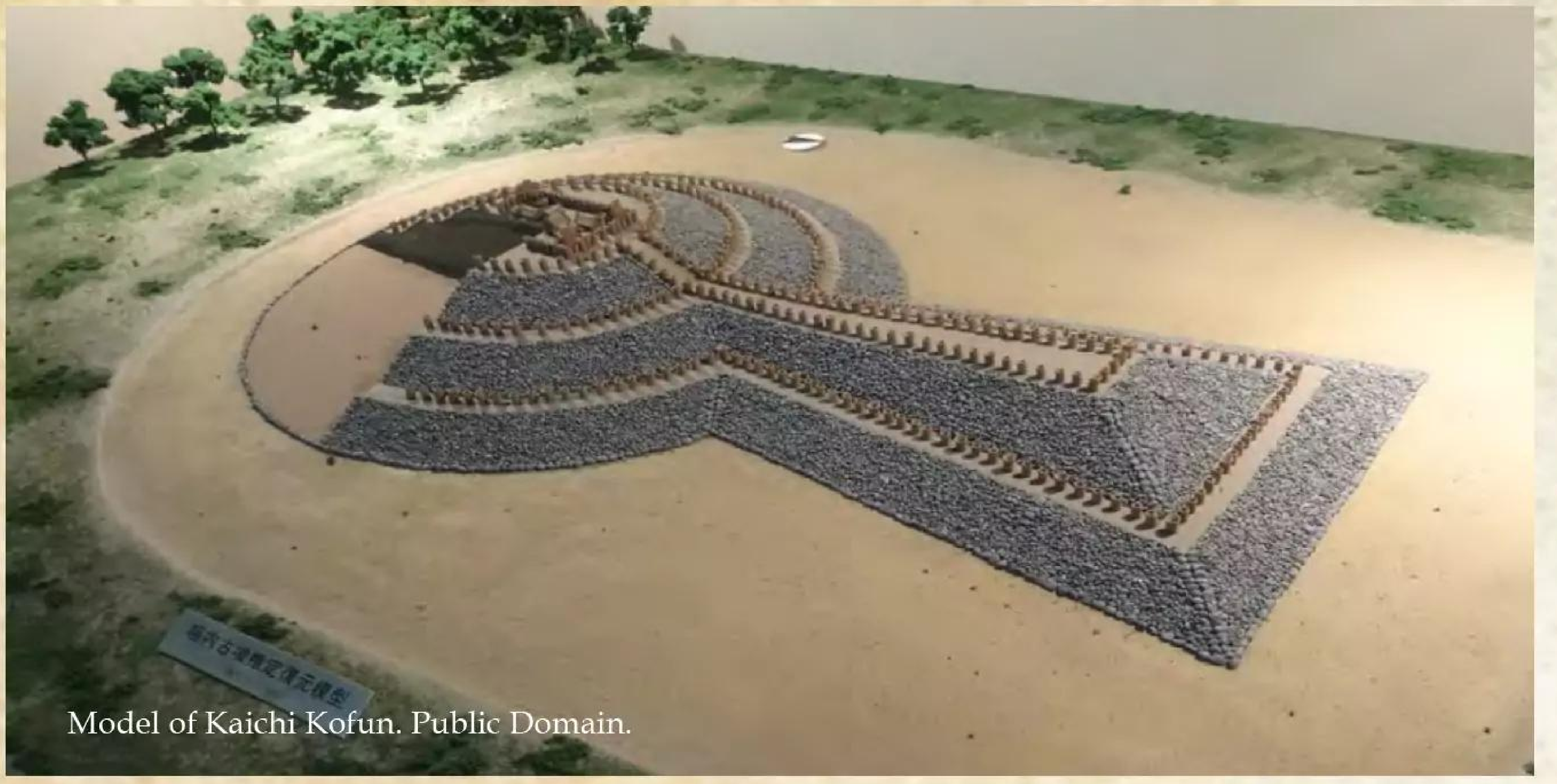
Boadicea Haranguing the Britons (called Boudicca, or Boadicea) by John Opie. Public Domain

IS: Is the location of Himiko's tomb still debated?

CH: Yes, her tomb's location remains uncertain. Powerful leaders of her era were buried in large earthen mounds, often surrounded by clay haniwa figurines. Two likely sites are the Hashihaka Kofun in central Honshu, near the origins of Japan's imperial family, and a site on Kyushu, closer to Korea and China. Both regions claim her for tourism, but strict Japanese regulations limit archaeological digs, citing respect for imperial tombs and concerns about challenging official historical narratives. If Himiko's tomb were found and linked to the imperial line, it would be a monumental discovery.

IS: Are there parallels between Himiko and shamanic rulers in other cultures?

CH: Himiko shares traits with East Asian shamanic traditions, including ritual dancing and the use of bronze mirrors and bells, some of which she received through trade with China. These mirrors, often worn and hung from robes, were likely used in ceremonies. Her role in communing with gods to ensure harvests also aligns with shamanic practices across East Asia, and possibly South America, though the latter requires further study. Some modern Japanese imperial court dances may trace back to these ancient rituals.



Model of Kaichi Kofun. Public Domain.

IS: What drew you to Himiko's story, and why is her legacy intriguing?

CH: Himiko's story captivates me because it reflects Japan's enduring connection to nature, which I see through my wife's Japanese perspective and in cultural practices like haiku and Shinto rituals. Many Japanese today claim to be non-religious yet revere nature, a tradition traceable to Himiko's era, when natural sites were seen as supernatural. Her mystery—our limited knowledge of her life and powers—invites imagination, making her a compelling figure to explore.

IS: How might Himiko be perceived in modern Japanese society?

CH: Himiko could be a transformative political figure today, a charismatic woman who could revitalize Japan's often lackluster political landscape. Her ability to inspire and lead would contrast with the "grey" politicians many Japanese criticize, offering a dynamic, nature-connected leadership style.

IS: What resources would you recommend for learning more about Himiko?

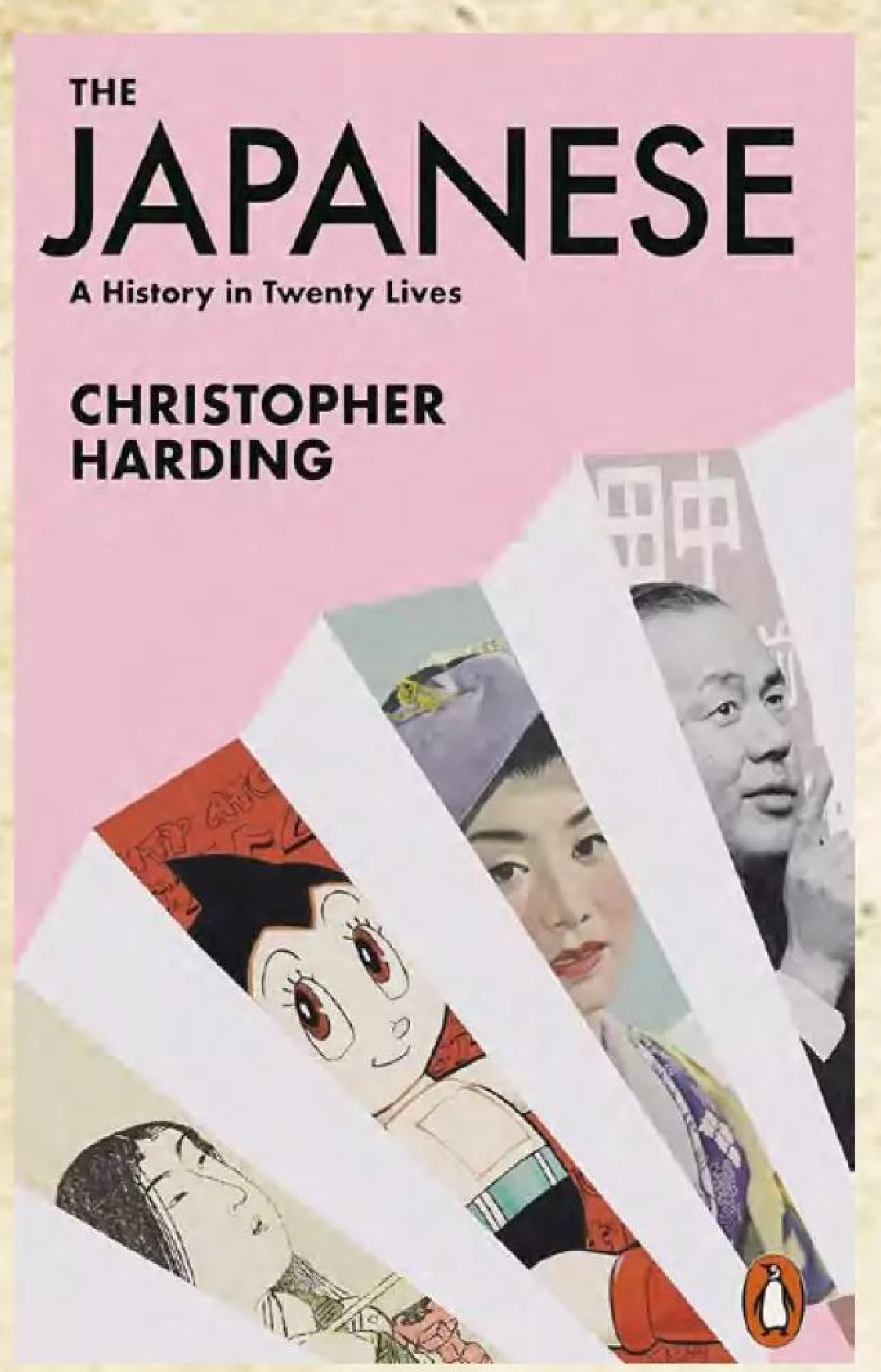
CH: My book, The Japanese: A History in Twenty Lives, includes a chapter on Himiko, providing a colorful introduction to her era. Additionally, Laura Miller's essay "Rebranding Himiko" is an excellent online resource, exploring how she's been reimagined in modern Japan, from environmental symbolism to local branding.

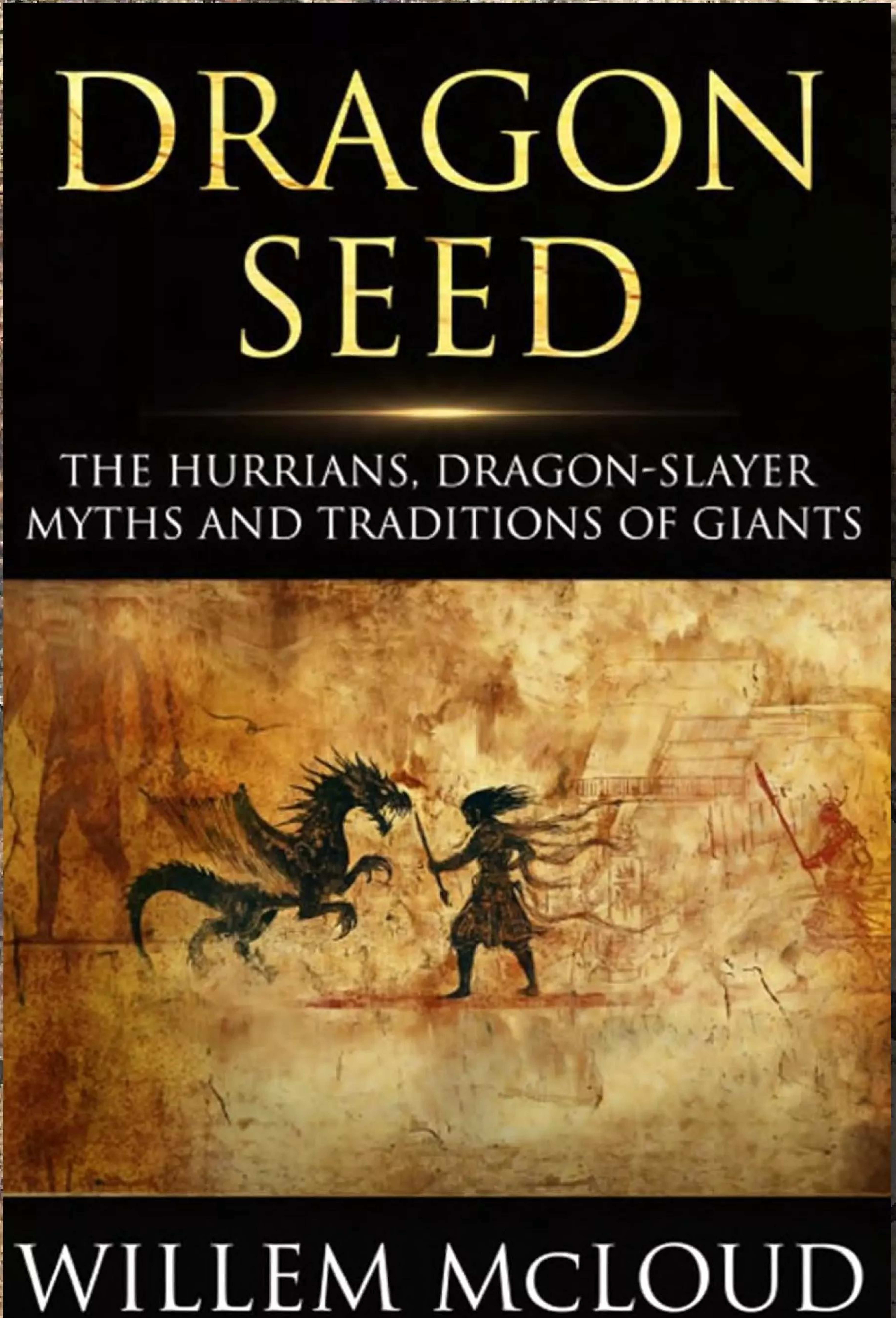
IS: In one sentence, why does Himiko still matter today?

CH: Himiko remains significant as a powerful symbol of Japan's enduring love affair with nature and its spiritual heritage.

IS: Thank you, Dr. Harding, for this fascinating discussion.

CH: My pleasure—thank you for having me!





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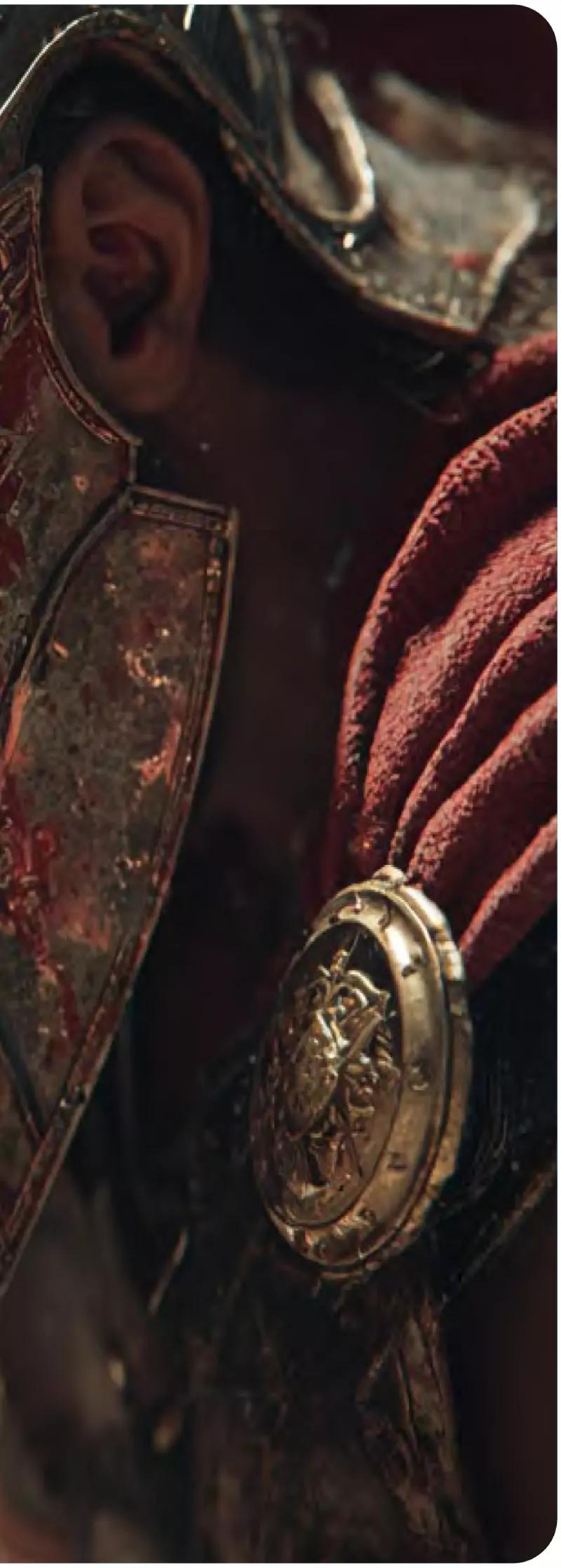
THE HURRIANS, DRAGON-SLAYER
MYTHS AND TRADITIONS OF GIANTS

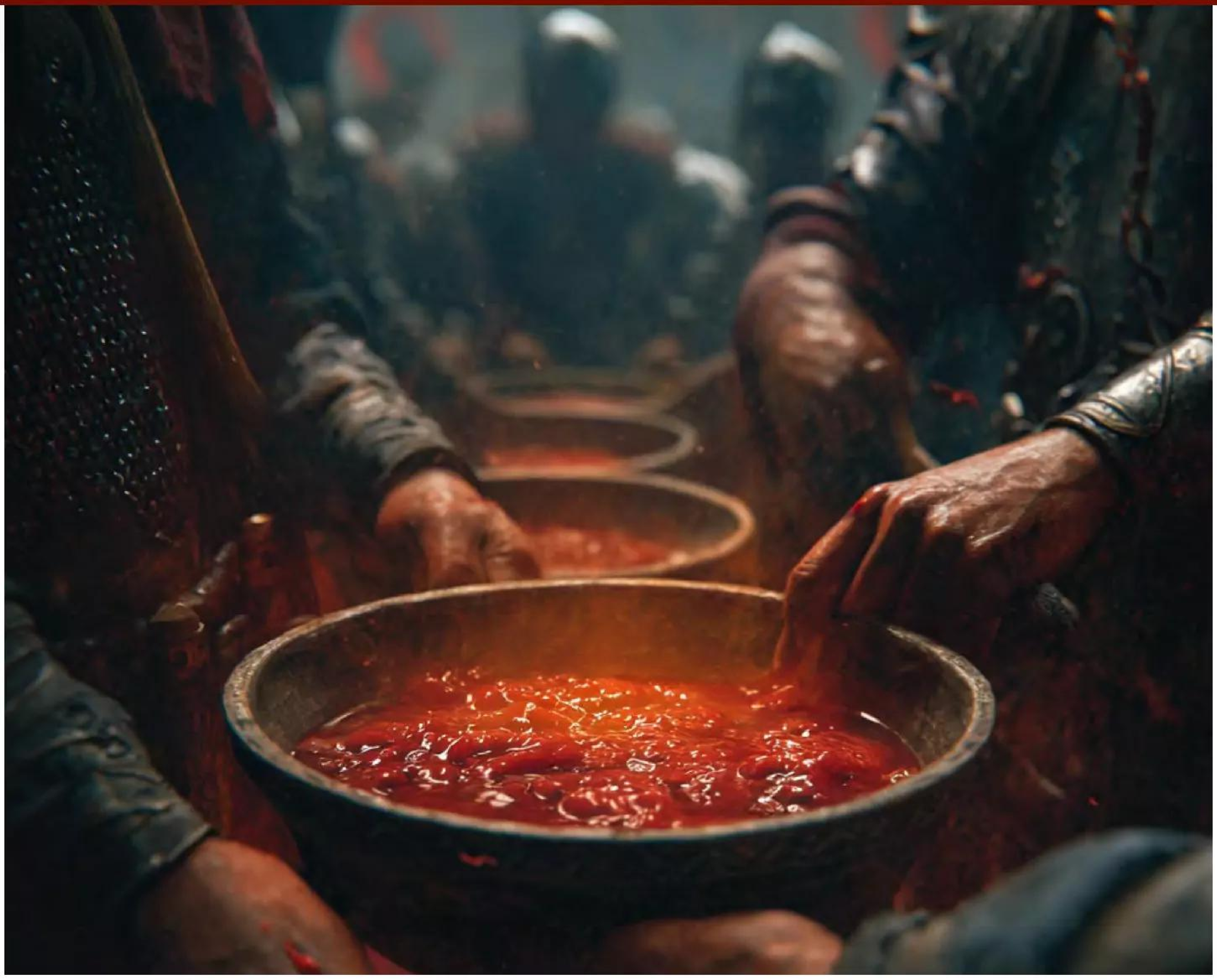
WILLEM McLOUD

By Massimo Bonasorte

Lost Flavors:
The Mysterious “Black Broth” of Ancient Sparta

Ancient writers described it as “the worst food ever created by humans,” yet it symbolized Spartan discipline and austerity. The enigmatic “Black Broth” (*melas zomos*), a dark soup made from pork and blood, remains one of ancient Greece’s most captivating culinary mysteries. Shrouded in legend, this notorious dish offers a unique glimpse into Spartan society - a civilization renowned for its stark simplicity and military rigor. But what do we truly know about this contentious recipe? The earliest documented reference to Black Broth appears in the 5th century BC, initially mentioned by





the Greek poet Alcman and later vividly described by the historian Plutarch. In his biography, *Life of Lycurgus*, Plutarch portrays the dish with equal parts fascination and repulsion. It was a daily staple in Sparta's communal dining halls, the syssitia, which formed the cornerstone of Spartan social life.

Plutarch recounts a famous anecdote wherein visiting Athenians tasted the soup and remarked sarcastically: "Now we understand why the Spartans are fearless in battle!" (Life of Lycurgus, XII). Indeed, taste was hardly the primary aim of Spartan cooking. Rather, the broth was designed to fortify the warriors both physically and morally.

Recent archaeological research (Jameson, *Food and Drink in Ancient Greece*, 2020) highlights that this seemingly crude soup embodied deeper symbolism, reflecting Spartan views on communal identity and social cohesion.

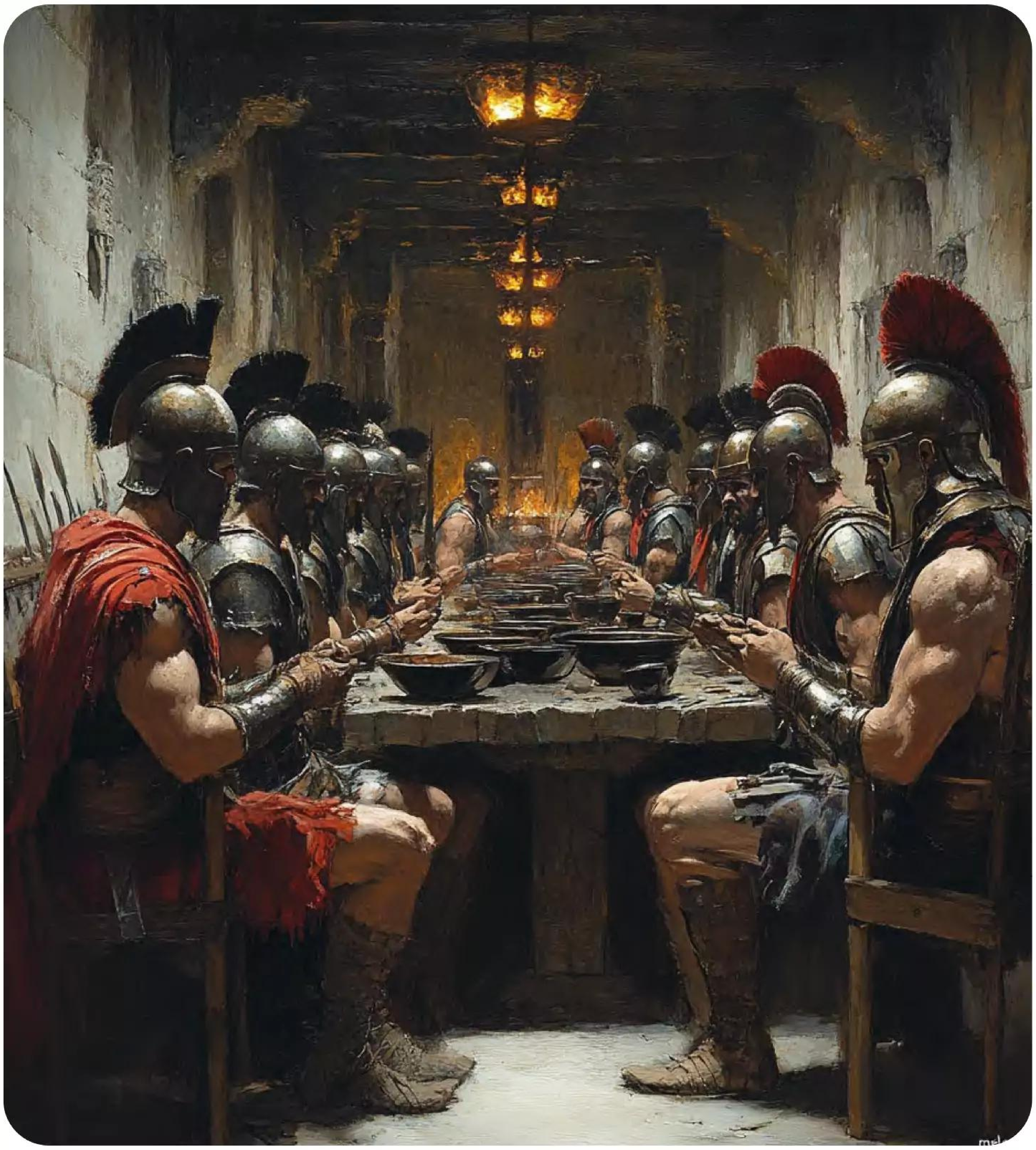
Symbolism Behind Ingredients

The key ingredients of Spartan Black Broth—pork meat, vinegar, pork blood, and salt—carried significant symbolic meanings in Greek culture:

Pork: Associated with prosperity, strength, and fertility, pork often featured in religious sacrifices dedicated to gods like Demeter and Persephone.

Blood: Symbolizing the duality of life and death, blood embodied the life force of Spartan warriors, creating a direct link to martial deities such as Ares.

Vinegar and Salt: Both represented purification and preservation, central to rites of passage and physical endurance. Vinegar specifically was known for its antibacterial properties.

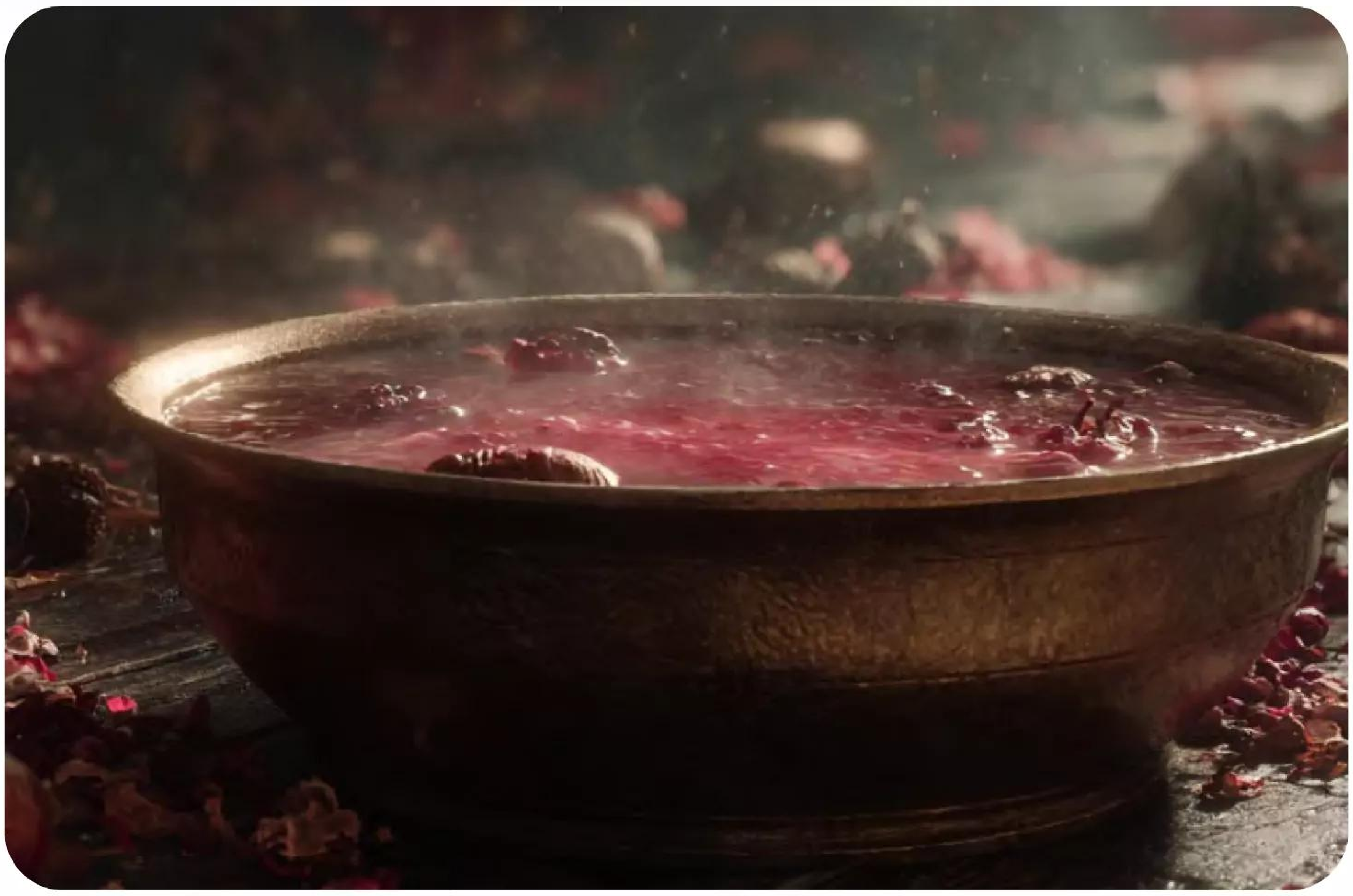


Collectively, these ingredients transformed the Black Broth into more than mere sustenance. It became a daily ritual connecting warriors to their divine patrons, intertwining food with identity and spirituality.

Curiosities and Superstitions

Superstitions surrounding the Black Broth were abundant. Legends claimed it had almost “magical” properties, rendering Spartan men impervious to fatigue and pain. Additionally, Spartan tradition mandated that adult males contribute ingredients to their dining halls, with failure to comply seen as moral weakness and grounds for social exclusion.

One particularly intriguing ritual involved young Spartan warriors tasting the broth during military training: their ability to consume it without hesitation or discomfort was considered proof of their worthiness as warriors (Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia*, 2021). Thus, the broth was closely associated



with bravery, masculinity, and resilience.

Precisely replicating the authentic Spartan Black Broth today poses challenges, given limited historical documentation. However, guided by ancient accounts and modern archaeological research, here is an adapted, palatable version allowing you to experience something of Sparta's culinary past.

Cooking and tasting Spartan Black Broth today is more than a unique culinary adventure—it's an immersive journey into an ancient mindset. Beyond its unusual flavor, the broth speaks volumes about Spartan values: courage, sacrifice, and collective identity.

Attempting this dish resurrects an intriguing fragment of ancient history. Through its bold taste, you might begin to grasp what it truly meant to live as a Spartan, at a time when food was more than nourishment—it embodied ritual and social cohesion. ■

Melas zomos

Ingredients (serves 4):
- 800 g lean pork meat (shoulder or leg)
- 100 ml pork blood (available from specialized butchers or substituted with blood sausage or pasteurized blood)
- 1 liter water
- 100 ml red wine vinegar
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 1 clove garlic
- Fresh oregano
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Instructions

1. Prepare the broth: Cut pork into small pieces, place in cold water, and bring slowly to a boil, skimming impurities from the surface.

2. Aromatic seasoning: Add chopped onion, whole garlic clove (remove at end), oregano, salt, and pepper. Simmer gently over low heat for about two hours until pork becomes very tender.

3. Add vinegar: Slowly pour red wine vinegar into the simmering broth. The vinegar imparts the broth's characteristic tang and improves digestion.

4. Incorporate blood: Reduce heat to minimum. Slowly stir pork blood (or substitute) into the hot broth to avoid clotting. Cook gently for another 5 minutes, stirring continuously.

5. Serve the broth: Ladle into bowls. According to culinary historians (Dalby, Food in the Ancient World, 2021), Spartans traditionally ate this dish alongside stale barley bread.

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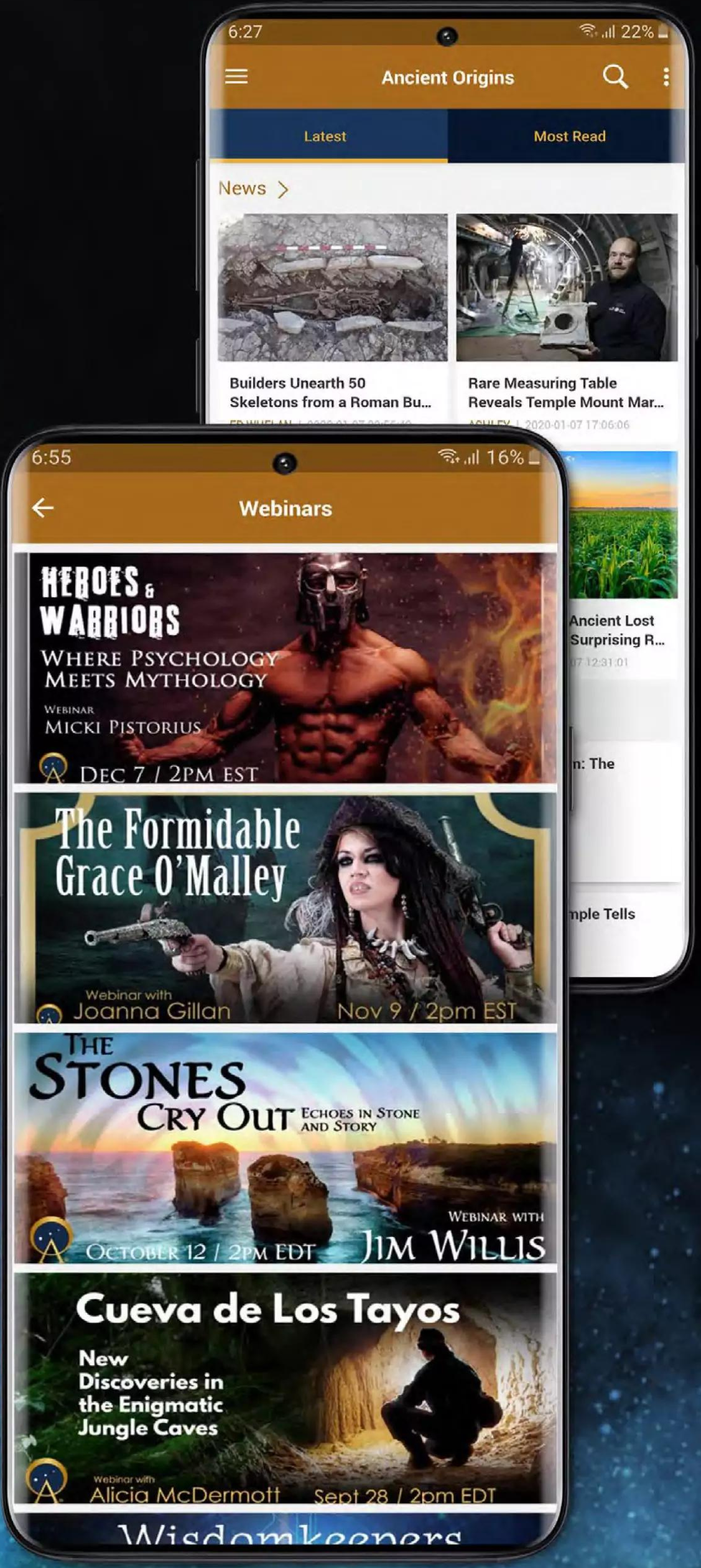

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